

Sermon – John 3: 14-21, Ephesians 2.1-10

Lent 4

Lord I lift your name on high! Lord I love to sing your praises!

I'm so glad you're in my life; I'm so glad you came to save us!

I love this hymn which we sang at the beginning of worship today. It's one of my favorites. And I love it because, not only is the music stirring, it's a song of proclamation. It tells of my love of Jesus, and also the Jesus story.

You came from heaven to earth to show the way,

From the earth to the cross my debt to pay.

From the cross to the grave, from the grave to the sky.

Lord I lift your name on high.

Now if any of you were wondering what I was going to preach on today after last week's sermon on prayer, I can tell you now that it's proclamation which is one of the four Ps that we introduced last year. You might remember that at Pentecost last year I preached about the four conditions for church growth those being Prayer, Presence, Proclamation and Persuasion. Last week I preached on Prayer, intentionally praying for growth in our worship, at our meetings, in our home groups, in our bible studies and so on.

The second precondition for growth is Presence. Having good presence within a community is necessary for recognition and awareness by people who don't know about Jesus or who aren't aware of church. And I think we do this pretty well. In Lara our presence is known largely because of the Op Shop. We would have at least 100 people coming through our site across the week, if you include the Food Relief program. With our recently established Playgroup, Little Treasures, we have another opportunity for building presence among the young families of Lara and Little River. Christ Church Little River also has presence by virtue of its grounds and historic building, as well as its special events including the annual Pancake Night and Blessing of the Pets service. Having Presence makes it easier for us all to have a conversation with our networks about us, especially when we have a range of social events outside of church-going worship which are comfortable for people to come to. Think Games nights, Wine and Cheese nights and High Teas. These events give people the opportunity to get to know us away from the worship space. They enable us to build relationships with people who don't yet know Jesus.

The third P is Proclamation and it's what I want to focus on today. Proclamation is providing people with the opportunity to hear the good news and also to be able to respond to it in a setting that they feel comfortable in. This might mean letting go some of our traditions some of the time. Typical examples of Proclamation events include relaxed services such as Family Christmas programs, specific women's or men's events, or perhaps even a home group of new families. These programs or groups should feature a clear and attractive proclamation which touches the heart and offers the opportunity to respond.

I think that proclamation is probably our weakest link both individually and as a church. So today I want to look at our scripture and see what it has to say about proclamation. Let's look at the Gospel reading first.

Well, if you've been coming to church for many years, as many of you have, the sentence from John chapter 3, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." will be very familiar. It's a sentence that often crops up in both traditional and contemporary liturgy. And I think this is because it's a sentence that really speaks into the core of our faith. It talks about the mysterious relationship between God and Jesus, that Jesus is God's only Son. It speaks into the extraordinary act of God in giving this precious Son to our world. Jesus, the only Son of God, begotten not made, of one being with the Father, comes into our world, as we sang in the hymn, to show the way, and was then lifted up, from the earth to the cross our debt to pay. And this lifting up, this raising can refer to three things: the lifting up of Jesus onto the cross and his death, atoning for our sins, it can be the raising of Jesus from the grave and his amazing resurrection, and it can also mean his being lifted up to sit at the right hand of the Father on his ascension.

This is the core of our faith, that a relationship with Jesus is eternal. A relationship with Jesus will endure throughout our lives and beyond the gates of death. How can you express your belief in Jesus and his saving impact on your life? Isn't this a message worth proclaiming?

And the Apostle Paul was one of the most ardent of proclaimers and persuaders. He didn't start out as a believer. In fact, Paul, then known as Saul, was persecuting the believers of Jesus the Messiah. And famously he was converted on the road to Damascus in one of those lightening bolt experiences. Perhaps some of you have had this type of conversion experience. Everyone's experience of God is different and unique. I know for me, that my relationship with God has been a slowly growing and evolving process across

my life. God has been a stable presence in my life, even when many other people in my life have not. How does Paul speak today into proclamation?

This segment of the Letter to the Ephesians speaks into the topic of Grace which is one of the core planks of our faith. Paul says “But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved..... For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works.” In echoes of our Gospel reading, we hear that God, out of the great love he had for us, even when we were dead through our sins, made us alive with Christ. And this is grace. It’s not something that we earn because of our works or what we do. Grace is the gift of God because we believe. When we believe, we receive God’s forgiveness for all our sins, our stubbornness, our willfulness, not your way but mine, our lack of respect or kindness to our neighbours, the list goes on, and I’m probably just reflecting on my own faults. All I can say is Thank God, that you love me in spite of my faults and that by grace I am indeed saved and can be alive together with Christ, having that enduring relationship with Jesus.

Aren’t these readings wonderful? Don’t they speak to each other? Well I’m going to ask you all now to speak to each other and answer two questions.

1. How can I personally proclaim the good news?
2. How can we as a church proclaim the good news?

Let’s take 5 minutes and answer these questions in small groups and then be prepared to share your conversations with all of us.

Thank you for all of those ideas on proclamation. Wouldn’t it be great if this wasn’t our weakest link? I am hopeful that in the weeks and months to come that we will build confidence in this space. Perhaps our first proclamation event can be the making palm crosses afternoon? A small group of craft oriented people talking about the meaning of the cross having invited other crafty people to be a part of it.

Let us pray.

Loving God, I give thanks that we have the opportunity every day to proclaim the good news. Give us all courage and wisdom to be able to say the right words when the opportunity arises. Help us as a church to build programs and events that proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, his birth, death and resurrection. I pray this in his mighty name, Amen.