

Sermon – Pentecost 25

Psalm 127, Mark 12:38-44

Unless the Lord builds the house: their labour is but lost that build it.

Our Psalm today is one of those classic psalms. I use it in the service to bless a new home and it also features in the school song at Christ Church Grammar School, where I chaplained during my curacy. It's quite short, only 5 verses, but contains a profound message. It doesn't matter how hard we work, at whatever projects we are involved in, unless the Lord wills it, our labour is in vain. It's a salient lesson for those of us who have workaholic tendencies and believe that the harder we strive, the greater the results – this idea of the “self-made man” is inherently flawed from a Judeo-Christo perspective. No one is self made. It is only through the grace and provision of the Lord that we reap our rewards. The psalmist says nothing happens that isn't the Lord's provision.

“It is in vain that you rise up early and go so late to rest, eating the bread of toil: for the Lord bestows honour—and on those whom he loves.”

It's good to remember this as we reflect on the year that was, a year of many blessings, with Tara coming to work with us, the Diocese blessing us with a grant to help cover her wages, children and families coming to our playgroup, community continuing to give and to shop at our Op shop, and the Karen coming to worship at Holy Trinity on Sunday afternoons. Yes, we have worked hard to make these programs tick the way they do, but it is God who ultimately provides and I like to think that our hard work is about honouring the Lord, here in our communities of Little River and Lara.

Our Gospel reading also has something to say that is very relevant to us today. It's the story of widow's mite and the nature of giving. Jesus is in Jerusalem during his last week before the cross and he is teaching by contrasting the behaviours of the people before him in the Temple. Firstly he looks at the scribes. Scribes were powerful people in Jesus' day. In a predominantly agrarian society, which had low levels of literacy, they were the ones who were trained to read and write and formalize the commercial, religious and government transactions of the day. They held respectable and high ranking positions in Jewish society, perhaps the equivalent of lawyers in our day. And what does Jesus have to say about them? He says,

“Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honour at banquets! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

He's quite damning of their apparent hypocrisy, and how their sense of value is anchored in the fleeting respect found in and adoration of this world. Perhaps Jesus is a bit like the psalmist in condemning such self-centeredness or achieving our value out of our own works, and not striving for a God centered identity.

Next Jesus turns his focus to the line of people who are making their contributions to the temple treasury and the running of the Temple. He watches rich people give lots of money and then sees a poor widow put in two small coins. He says,

“Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.”

I find that this piece of scripture always pricks my conscience. Are you like me, and tend to give out of your abundance? Despite the cost of living crisis which is probably making a dent in some of our bank accounts, most of us here in Lara and Little River are pretty comfortable, having paid off or in the process of paying off our own homes. At face value, the poor widow gives everything she has. What does this really mean? By giving everything she has, the widow surrenders all to God in perfect trust. She has the attitude of Christ who, just in days, will surrender all to the will of his father and allow himself to be crucified. Complete surrender to God is something that I have always struggled with. It seems to me that there has always been something better to do around the corner. What about you? Have you surrendered to God, living the values that Jesus taught us to love our neighbours as ourselves?

After the service, we will hold our annual meeting and celebrate the blessings that God has bestowed upon us over the last year here in Lara and Little River. But how do we respond to these blessings? If we are growing and becoming a more diverse church, a multi generational church, how do we respond? These are questions to pray about and to bring to our Planning Day in February. Three years ago we held our first planning day and out of this we discerned our new vision to be Welcoming, God Centered and Thriving. Since then, our Mission Action planning has reflected this vision and we are seeing God’s provision in becoming a

thriving God centered community who truly welcomes newcomers. Where is God leading us for the next three years? After creating our new vision in 2022, we created a mission that was “At the end of 2025, we will be an engaged, thriving and known God Centered congregation with relevant and welcoming styles of worship who serve the needs of all age groups of our community.” I think we have made significant progress towards this mission and in February we need to discern what needs to be put in place to become an engaged, thriving and known God Centered congregation by 2028. Where should our missional focus be? Do we need to make any investments into our plant and buildings? How do we create better pathways for people to come to know Jesus? These are the sorts of questions that we will need to grapple with next February, which will come quickly enough!

Our readings today point to the nature of our faith. That Jesus calls us to surrender to God, to love God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our mind and with all our strength, and to love our neighbour as ourself. As we move into a new church year, and hopefully new people, families and children, how are you preparing to respond? How are you preparing to welcome new life into our community so that we continue on the road to renewal, become Welcoming, God centered and thriving?

Let us pray.

Loving God, we thank you for all that you provide us, a beautiful place to live, family and friends, plentiful food and sustenance. We ask that you continue to bless us and call people into this community, allowing the Holy Spirit to work in their hearts and bring them to faith in Jesus Christ our Lord, in whose mighty name we pray, Amen.