

SERMON FOR SUNDAY 30th August 2020

Let my mouth's utterances be pleasing

And my heart's stirring before You,

LORD, my rock and redeemer.

(Psalm 19:15. *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*. Robert Alter, 2019.)

My son Evan, and my husband Rob, are great storytellers. They are pretty good at bush poetry too. I think it's in the Queenslander genes, of which I have none. I, on the other hand, well, storytelling, poetry, they're not really my gifts. I have gifts, as you do; and over the coming months I'm sure we will get to know more about one another and encourage one another in the building up of those gifts. For now, take it from me, I'm not a storyteller. Nor am I a fully-fledged Queenslander.

I grew up in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne. Now it's called Maroondah, but it was Croydon then. We, two brothers and two sisters, had a large block of suburban land, with rows of sweet-smelling pine trees, great for climbing, and we had plenty of room for cricket, footy (yes AFL), and we had all sorts of play. We had chickens, dogs, plum and apple trees too. The region used to be filled with orchards, and with all those fruit trees, lots of blossoms. So, even though I have spent most of my life living in Queensland, you don't have to scratch too hard to find my Victorian roots. In a way it feels like I'm home, except for the strange circumstances of lockdown, of course.

So, here I am, and here you are. Each of us called, in some inexplicable way, to be here together at this time. It's a strange thing, a call. It comes to each of us in different ways. Mine has been nothing like Moses' call. There was no angel, no burning bush, no intense mysterious presence naming self as "I will be...". Actually, there was no verbal discussion with God directly, not like Moses had. Most of my conversations with God have been mediated, through prayer. Actually, I have tended to accept the call of the church synonymously as the call of God. Trust me, I know there is a difference; still, I put my trust in Christ's church (mostly), and she often leads me to where I need to be.

Maybe if Moses' call had been as easy as mine, we wouldn't see him trying to get out of it.

But that's what he tried to do. In verse 11, of our Exodus reading (Ex 3:1-15), Moses responds to God's call with "who am I that...". This has been considered by some scholars as, 'a standard biblical expression to avoid commitment'. Gideon and Jeremiah tried similar avoidance tactics (Judges 6:15; Jeremiah 1:6). Gods heard it all before, and responds to Moses' avoidance with clear affirmation, "I will be with you...". But for Moses that's not enough. He feels unworthy, unclear of who God really is, he needs signs and even an interpreter (Aaron). The faithfulness of God is such that God looks past Moses' rejection of God's very Self. Moses' needs are satisfied.

For me, it's important to remember that before all Moses' needs were satisfied, God offered what was really important, Godly Presence. It's doubly important when our reading is put into the context of God hearing the people's cries and remembering the covenant made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Exodus 2:24-25). The covenant, "I will be your God and you will be My people" is reiterated at least 40 times throughout scripture. Maybe God's presence and faithfulness is always enough.

2

I know, looking back, that in the times when I've forgotten God's presence or even actively turned away from it, I have been at my very lowest points in life. I also know, looking back, that God's Presence is what has sustained me and even brought me out of any self-induced isolation. So, it's never been that God is not enough, it's more like, like, I can't always take God in. Something like this is what seems to be happening to Peter in the gospel reading too.

Once again, in context, Peter had already declared the Godliness of Jesus (Matt 16:13-17), when Jesus proclaims, what will later become known as the faith of the church; Christ died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. Well, Jesus doesn't actually use those words, but in a nutshell that's what he's telling his disciples. That's what this community will be built on. But Peter, the rock who so recently had proclaimed Jesus' godliness, can't take it in; his Lord, the One synonymous with God (I AM), die? So soon? It's all too much.

I think it's easy, from our vantage point, to look at Peter and see a faithless, fool. But imagine for just a moment how truly profound the statement he's being asked to take in. Jesus' ministry is really only just getting started, he's only been leading this motley mob for a few short years, and now he's leaving? And in such a violent unimaginable way? Peter possibly feels insecure, inadequate, and let down. I think Jesus is very aware of what's going on for Peter, because he names it; Satan.

I have to confess that I've never really noticed before how clearly and directly Jesus seems to be addressing the Accuser (Accuser is a better name for Satan I find). It's like he's seen the fear build up in Peter and in calling it out. Jesus frees Peter. Jesus frees Peter to follow, and the following, requires seeing the fear and being faithful anyway. Peter learns, as we do. Following Jesus is not easy, it requires deep listening, to hear when fears are building up. It requires courage to call out the Accuser whenever and wherever we find him, and it requires faith that Godly Presence is enough. We can do nothing Godly without trusting in that Presence.

I have a strong conviction, that one, of the many reasons, many Uniting Churches are declining, is that we fear our own dying. Not personally, although no doubt that's possible, but communally, as a church. So, friends I'm going to call out that fear, when I can, and I pray that you will too, especially if you hear it from me. I believe this is important because the Accuser has a plan, that's to deny the life and presence of Christ in our community.

God's plan is what I want to focus on, that the abundant life of Christ is a gift for all to share. Our way of sharing that gift is following Jesus.

Jesus taught Peter that following him requires accepting the profound faithfulness in proclaiming, Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. We have been taught that too. Our following Jesus is a gift to share; a gift our communities need; our faith. That faith can be seen and known in our free choice to live as disciples. Life in discipleship is grounded in the deep knowing that God is Present, with us, and that, that is ENOUGH.

Lord Jesus Christ teach us today to follow with faithfulness in your presence in our lives and our communities. Amen.

