

Reflection - The Second Sunday in Lent
25-02-2024
St Cuthbert's Anglican Church – Tweed Heads

Genesis 17:1-7,15-16 God's covenant with Abram and Sarai

Psalms 22: 24-32 The Lord rules over rich and poor alike

Romans 4:13-25 Abraham justified by faith, as are we.

Mark 8: 31-38 Jesus predicts his death for the first time
Jesus rebukes Peter
Jesus challenges his disciples and the crowds
To take up their cross and follow him.

Introduction

Today is the second Sunday of Lent. As we looked at last week, Lent is a time in our church calendar set aside as a penitential time. A time to reflect, and to prepare ourselves for the celebration of Easter. Today, as we reflect, I would like us to look at the "Big Picture" of our lives. In effect I would like to ask the question, "How do we, do life?". What drives us, how do we see a life well lived?

Example – How Life is Lived

I'd like to begin with an example of how I think some people see life.

Hands up everyone who's ever played the board game, "Monopoly"?

We don't play it a lot, but we have had some rather fun nights and some challenging nights with our children, and especially with our son-in-law, who loves the thrill of playing, but doesn't enjoy losing very much.

I think, although we may not articulate it, or really dwell on it, the world around us tries to push us into the mold, of living our lives like we are playing a game of monopoly. In monopoly you do the best you can, to get as much as you can, and at times have little regard for others.

In living life this way, we are at the centre of our own lives. You can have good luck or bad luck, but ultimately it's all up to you.

I believe if we put ourselves, at the centre of our own lives, it is a recipe for disaster. I believe the yearning and searching for community, and the loneliness epidemic in our society today, are the results of putting ourselves at the centre of our own lives.

God at the Centre

Christianity, of course encourages selflove and selfcare, we should be looking after ourselves. But in Christianity, God should be at the centre of our lives.

When we accept what Jesus has done for us, and turn our lives over to God, the call is to give all of our lives over to God.

I recall a Religious Education lesson I was taking once at a High School, and I said that I loved God first. One of the students, a teenage girl, said to me, "So are you telling me that you love God, more than you love your wife." When I said yes, she was adamant that was not right. She couldn't conceive of how loving God first could be a good thing. The reality is though, that if my relationship with God is good, then I will be better enabled to love those around me. My wife doesn't miss out if I love God first. It's not a zero sum game. If I love God first, then who I am inside changes and I can actually love others better.

It seems counterintuitive, but if we put God first, rather than ourselves then we will find fulfilment in our lives, better than we can begin to imagine.

God at the Centre – Mark's Gospel

So as Christians we are called to love God first. Let us look at what today's gospel tells us about loving God first, or as I framed it earlier, putting God at the centre of our lives.

In today's Gospel reading we hear Jesus teaching his disciples that he was going to undergo suffering, be rejected, and be killed, but then on the third day rise again.

If you allow yourself to undergo suffering, be rejected and then be killed, it seems pretty clear, that you are not putting yourself first. Jesus did this for us. In doing this Jesus not only saves us, but Jesus also gives us an example of how we are to live. And when we live our lives placing Jesus at the centre, we have the assurance that if we die with Jesus, we will also live with Jesus.

After Jesus tells the disciples what is going to happen to him, we hear poor old Peter. In this gospel narrative, I feel Peter is a bit like the girl I spoke of earlier from the Religious Education class. Peter couldn't conceive that it would be a good thing for Jesus to suffer and die. And so, Jesus says to Peter, "Get behind me Satan". Peter is looking at the situation in a worldly way and not in God's way.

Jesus goes on to say, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵ For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."

In this world we live in today, I don't think it is easy to understand that living self sacrificially is good for us. But Jesus assures us in Mark's gospel that this is the only way to actually save our own lives.

As Christians we are called to constantly examine our motives in the way we live our lives. Am I doing this because it's what I want, or because it will make me feel good about myself, or am I doing it because I want to bring glory to God.

Jesus then makes the point again,

³⁶ For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷ Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? ³⁸ Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.'

So as Christians, we are called to seek to put God first, and not seek after what we think is best.

We are called to take up our cross and follow Jesus.

And how do we take up our cross? It will quite naturally be different for each of us in our own situation, but taking up our cross will involve living by faith.

God at the Centre – Living by Faith

When we place Jesus at the centre of our lives, we are living our lives in faith.

In the readings from Genesis and Paul's letter to the Romans today, we have heard about the faith of Abraham and Sarah. We hear how they listened to God, and trusted God even in the face of great odds.

What we do as Christians is very important. But what is even more important is the motivation behind what we do. In other words, it's not as much about what we do, but who we are?

If our faith is grounded in the life and teachings of Jesus, then goodness should flow from how we live our lives. Are we seeking peace and harmony around God's will, or are we promoting conflict and division?

My wise spiritual adviser once said to me,

“Are you working hard for God or are you doing God's work?”

In other words, are you doing what you want, or is your life so in tune with God through faith, that you are actually doing what God wants.

Conclusion

As Christians we are called to live by firmly placing Jesus, at the centre of our lives.

If we try to live our lives only for ourselves, we will miss out on the wonderful plans God has designed for us to live into.

We are called to live by faith.

We are called to take up our cross and follow Jesus.

This will involve struggle and self sacrifice, and Lent is a good time for us to reflect on how we should best take up our cross, as we seek to follow Jesus in our lives.

And when we do take up our cross, the one that Jesus has prepared for us, we will find true meaning, and real purpose and fulfilment beyond our imagination. Amen.