

The Conquering Cross

A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 29 April 2015, by David Gill. Readings for Palm Sunday were Isaiah 50:4-9a, Philippians 2:5-11 and St Mark 11:1-11.

Students preparing for ordination are sometimes told: you should preach every sermon as if it were your last.

Now, I have no reason to think that this sermon will be my last. There is nothing to suggest I am about to be silenced, either by God or by the Presbytery of Sydney. But this is the last time I will speak to you as ... well, as whatever I've been for the past twelve months.

Ockert Meyer concluded his ministry here one year ago. My colleague Neil Ericksson had been scheduled to lead worship the following Sunday but illness intervened. I filled in. Ditto for the Sundays and Tuesdays that followed. Soon I found myself being treated as the minister pro-tem of St Stephen's. And you found yourselves lumbered with the seemingly endless ministry of an uninvited, unappointed, canonically illegitimate, part-time geriatric.

For me these have been twelve rather wonderful months. But the time has come to conclude the arrangement -- more accurately, the non-arrangement -- so that the church can move on.

In that sense, today's is my last sermon. There is a lot I would like to say to you, but a three hour sermon might strain some friendships as well as earn us some parking tickets. So let us focus, instead, on where we find ourselves in the Church's year. It's a special day.

Palm Sunday.

Jesus is entering the holy city of his people. He will share a last meal with his followers. He will know despair. He will be betrayed, arrested, condemned, denied, mocked, abandoned by his friends and seemingly by his God. He will be tortured, and executed. Come Friday, we will be gazing again on the horror of the cross.

And we will face the question: what did it all mean? What did this life and death signify? What, ultimately, is the Jesus drama all about?

Two Sundays ago the lectionary brought us a reading from St John's gospel that included a verse we know well. John 3:16 – *“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”*. Keith Garner spoke about it. If I were preaching my last sermon, that would be my text.

That verse stands as one of the most powerful affirmations in the whole of the Bible. Martin Luther called it “the gospel in a nutshell”.

It brings back a key moment in my own faith journey, when as a teenager I sat in Pennant Hills Congregational Church and listened to our little choir screech its way through Stainer's well-known setting of John 3:16. Not the greatest music, perhaps. But for me that evening the Christian faith came alive. It began to make the most wonderful sense.

Think about it.

God so loved ...

There are so many pictures of God. So many arguments about God. God talk is everywhere. Try to block out the worst of all that god noise.

Ignore the God who is used against others as a political weapon, whether by Islamists or by Christians, whether in the Middle East or the United States or, yes, in Australia too. Don't touch the God who is invoked to foster hatred, to legitimize trampling on someone else's human rights. Avoid like the plague the God who is wheeled out to foster support for one side or the other in time of war.

Leave aside for a moment the many other pictures of God – the merciless judge, the all-knowing police officer, the absentee landlord, the cosmic power that kicked everything off and then went missing, the puppeteer pulling strings that make us jump, the indifferent deity who just doesn't give a damn.

Leave all that aside. And focus on this one staggering claim: God, the ultimate reality, is ... love. Compassion unbounded, mercy without limit, caring without end. God ... loves.

... the world ...

A couple of years ago I was reading a novel set in the 18th century, and hence well laced with 18th century views of religion. The lead character had no doubt about who God loves: Protestants, more precisely Anglican Protestants, even more precisely English Anglican Protestants! Everyone else was beyond the pale. Fortunately, the ecumenical movement has dragged us, screaming, a long way since then.

But we have still a way to go. The God of our instincts remains too small. We still like making God in our own image. We think he smiles on people like, well, like us. But that's not the gospel. God so loved the *world*. Not just the Jews or the Christians, the young or the old, Middle Easterners or Anglo-Saxons, the religious or the righteous, the straight or the successful. But this whole crazy, bewildering, mixed up, wonderful human family.

Some of us in this congregation have been in prisons, as visitors or as guests of Her Majesty or perhaps as both. You know the first thing that hits you in jail? It's that those behind bars are just like those of us outside. The only difference is that they've been caught and the rest of us have not – yet!

God's love does not see people's differences, the labels we lose so much sleep about. God just sees people, a whole world of people. And he invites us to see the same.

... that he gave his son ...

Today we watch that man riding the donkey into Jerusalem. It's not just a brave individual refusing to be deterred by the odds stacked against him. What we see is the love of God, in action. A love that will culminate in the events of this week, a love to be symbolized for all time by a couple of wooden planks, some nails and a crown of thorns. We try to take it in, thunderstruck, baffled.

Near the end of Graham Greene's novel *Brighton Rock*, an old priest is speaking with a deeply troubled girl as she tries to make sense of her chaotic life. At one point he says *"You can't conceive, my child, nor can I or anyone, the ... appalling ... strangeness of the mercy of God"*.

That mercy will be at its deepest, its strangest, its most appalling, when the cross is raised on Calvary.

... that everyone who believes may have life ...

Belief is, at best, a struggle. You and I, in our more honest moments, know that we're hanging on to the Christian faith by our fingernails. If everything depends on the strength of our believing, we're in big trouble.

But it's not our believing that everything depends upon. It's something far stronger, far more enduring.

A few years ago the World Council of Churches published a book entitled *A Procession of Prayers*. It was a collection of prayers and meditations by Christians around the world, following the life of Christ and relating it to the needs of people. There was one prayer in particular that grabbed my attention. It was from a person suffering from Alzheimer's disease. And it was very simple:

Dear Lord Jesus, I don't know who I am, I don't know where I am, and I don't know what I am. But please love me.

The message of these days is: he does.

With our own eyes we see it. Love that is real, unconditional, all embracing. Love that meets us in our moments of strength, that holds us even more surely in our hours of weakness. Love going on, unstoppable, unconquerable. To Jerusalem. To the end. And far, far beyond.

May the conquering cross, and all it represents, remain your strong hope and your enduring joy.

And may the blessing of God be with you all.

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