

Mission and Outreach

Micah 6.6-8, Luke 22.14-23, Acts 17.21-34

It is a special service at Trinity today as we have both a baptism and communion. Our Gospel reading from Luke took us to the meal table when Jesus sat down with his special friends. This second Sunday of Lent we once again see Jesus looking ahead to the cross. Taking a cup of wine in his hands he said, "This cup is the new agreement between God and people and it is written in my blood which is poured out for you." In partaking of Holy Communion we celebrate forgiveness and a new agreement with God which has been brought about by Jesus. But is this agreement just for us who are cloistered in this building for an hour on Sunday morning? Or is it good news for all people? As we enter this new phase for East Coast Bays Methodist Parish it is appropriate to reflect for a moment on the mission and outreach of the church

Four weeks ago, I had as my theme "change", and I told you about William Webb Ellis who with a fine disregard for the rules of football as played in his time first took the ball in his arms and ran with it. Let me begin today by telling you about another William who was also a student at Rugby School. His name was William Temple. William Temple is not known for his sporting achievements but for the fact that he went on to become the Archbishop of Canterbury. William Temple famously said, "The Church is the only society that exists for the benefit of those who are not its members."

Have we thought about that? That this church exists for the benefit of its non-members. Some of the things that we have been thinking about in relation to Local Shared Ministry are a preaching team, a worship team and lay sacramental ministers. These things are important, but they are for us, looking after ourselves and our services in the church. They pale in comparison to the importance of all of us engaging with the mission and outreach of the church. Not only are the church's mission and outreach important as we seek to follow the call of Christ, but they are hugely important to the future viability of the church. Without mission and outreach you may be the last generation of this church.

Unfortunately, once again, churches often think that outreach is what they pay a minister to do. And I've been in churches where my wife and I were paid to:

- Start a Mainly Music group for pre-schoolers and their care-givers
- or start an English language class for new immigrants
- or start a foodbank for the needy in our own community

Outreach is not the job of the minister. It is the job of the congregation. It is not a *project or a programme*. It is about relationships. For example, if we start a Mainly Music group here because we want to have relationship with young families in the community the group will always be at arms-length from the church community. On the other hand, if we in the church community already have relationships with heaps of families with pre-schoolers and see a need to provide something for them, a new Mainly Music group could be part and parcel of the mission of the church. We need to start from the relationships that we already have, not the ones that we lack. And because we want to work with what is already happening, this whole area of mission and outreach does not become a *burden* - it is just about living an authentic Christian life. It is ordinary Christians taking interest in real people that they meet

My son has been transferred from his company's Auckland office to Sydney. So with his wife with their baby they made the move at the beginning of this year. It has been a real wrench, especially for his wife who has had to move from her family and friends at a time when perhaps she needs them the most. She has been a career woman and now she is at home all day with her baby in a neighbourhood where she knows no one. During one lonely day she took her little boy for a walk to the local park. A woman in the park came over and said 'hello', found out she was new in the

neighbourhood and to the country – so invited her to bring her husband and baby and meet her family for a drink that evening. That’s outreach! There are heaps of people new to this neighbourhood all around here looking for friendship and a welcome.

My wife and I visited a Malaysian Chinese woman here on the Shore who was a recent immigrant - and we were the first New Zealanders that she had met. She knew very little about the Christian faith, but was keen to find out. She attended church every Sunday following our visit and soon decided to become a Christian.

Here amongst North Shore City’s quarter of a million people, we have two little congregations: Trinity and All Hallows. Who are we? What do we believe? What’s our vision? Some years ago this parish adopted a vision statement that declares that we are all about “Representing Christ and serving the community.”

Let’s take the first part of that. We are to...

Represent Christ

How can we do that? We are to re-present Christ. Present him again and again to different people in different situations.

Our reading this morning from Acts told us of those first Christians taking the good news to people of other cultures. For them the task was difficult. The predominant culture of their known world was Greek. Greeks thought differently to Jews. They believed in many Gods. They saw people more as individuals than Jews did. So we read in Acts Paul’s attempts to translate the Gospel into the world-view of the Greeks. Speaking to the people of Athens he begins by coming alongside them – trying to understand their world.

- He speaks of the altars and idols by which they seek to reach out to God
- He quotes their poetry
- tells of people being children of God
- then moves on to the reconciliation with God made possible by the death and resurrection of Jesus

Western Christians working with other cultures are well aware of the model. Understand the way people think, then relate the gospel in their terms. Until relatively recently we haven’t thought so much that we need to use the same method here at home. But we must not underestimate the secularisation of our own culture. A generation of New Zealanders is growing up with little knowledge of the Christian faith and even less understanding of the culture of the church.

A while ago a young couple asked me to take their wedding. The groom had, at some stage, attended a church youth group. At that time he had decided to be a follower of Jesus and he had later shared his faith with his fiancée. It followed that these two believers in Jesus, desired to have God’s blessing on their marriage. So I took a lovely Christian wedding service for them in the courtyard of a restaurant. Then, more recently, they came and asked for a “naming ceremony” (their words) for their baby boy. In my church tradition we dedicate children and baptise adults. So we arranged for a service of dedication in the church where they acknowledged that their boy was a gift from God and their desire that he would grow up with a knowledge of gospel. I suggested that we include the dedication in one of our usual Sunday morning services, but they were apprehensive about that. They hadn’t been to a Sunday church service, and they were unsure about what would be expected. They asked if they could just appear for the dedication bit and then leave. I tried to explain that it’s all pretty relaxed, even if the baby screamed the whole way through that would be okay – but they were still seriously uncomfortable at the thought. So, I suggested that we have a special Saturday service for them and their friends and family.

On the Saturday they turned up with such a large group of family and friends that they filled the church! It was a lovely Christian service of thanks-giving and dedication, and everyone was pleased with the outcome. I told the story of Jesus blessing the children and presented to the parents the Children's Bible that the story came from. The family began reading it as soon as the service ended! After the service the father came up to me and said, "If I came along on a Sunday what should I wear?"

"Oh, it doesn't really matter, anything would be acceptable," I said

"No," he said "What specifically should I wear?"

"Well, smart jeans and a button up shirt would be fine"

"Okay. Is there any charge?" ...

So here we have a Christian couple, with a hunger for spiritual things, earnestly seeking God's blessing on their little family – with no experience of church at all. It hadn't really occurred to them that a regular church service would have any relevance to their lives... and they were worried that if they came, they wouldn't fit in. Welcome to main-stream Pakeha culture in the 21st Century!

For a church to represent Christ to a culture that has drifted away from it may seem like a very difficult task. But let's break that down into bite-sized pieces. How do we represent Christ to North Shore's quarter of a million people? We just do it one person at a time.

A retired couple I know who live here on the Shore were on their way to their daytime home group. As they were driving down the street they saw on the footpath a woman who was distressed. In fact she appeared to be weeping. The couple thought, 'we better go back and see if we can be of help.' When they stopped to talk to the woman they found that she had just had her bag snatched by a youth who had run off with it. In her bag was the money she had withdrawn for the week's groceries. "Well, we can't leave you here," they said. So they invited her to come along with them. At the home group she was surrounded by such love and practical care that, from that time on, she became part of the group. So impressed was she with her new circle of friends she even began to bring her neighbour along with her. Shortly afterwards she was baptized and became a member of the church.

When a church acts like this it serves the community. And that is what the church's vision statement calls us to do.

Serve the community

It is true that this also involves some organisation and programmes, but these grow out of our relationships and develop one step at a time.

Before coming here I was supply Presbyterian at Wesley Methodist, Papatoetoe. They have a great Senior Fellowship and those who go are always inviting everyone to attend them (senior or not, church people or not.) The last function that I attended at Wesley (well after I had started here) was their end-of-year luncheon. Their big hall was packed! All the seniors had invited in their friends their relations their neighbours. There was warmth and friendliness and for many this was their introduction to the church. This group is the life of the church. I don't think anyone was particularly seeing this as an evangelistic endeavour. They were just being friendly and the church was growing!

Our reading from the prophet this morning raises another way we serve the community. "What does the Lord require of you?" asks Micah. Then he answers:

Act justly

Love mercy

and walk humbly with your God

The first two parts of this requirement concern our relationships with other people: To act justly and to love mercy. This religion of the prophets is very practical. It is geared to everyday life. You see, 'What does the Lord require of you?' is the most important question that a person can ask in their life. The whole of our lives, what we do, and say and how we act, should hinge on its answer. Whatever our nationality, whatever our theology, whatever our social status, whatever our abilities – we cannot go wrong in life if we but act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God. We plough through the first books of the First Testament and find hundreds of rules and rituals – to which the religious leaders added thousands more. In one sweep of the arm the prophet Micah wipes them all off the table and says *this* is what is required: act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.

This requirement for justice and mercy takes our attention again outside our group to the local community and to our global neighbourhood. It may mean that we will stand with those who need an advocate: the refugee, the homeless, the mental health survivors to name a few. It will mean that we will take seriously complex issue of extreme poverty. It is *our problem* that in a world with sufficient resources we allow 50,000 people to die every day from poverty. And it is appropriate that we respond individually by doing such things as buying Fair Trade products, supporting development projects and sponsoring children. But there may also be a congregational response to the crying need for justice and mercy: pressuring governments to honour the Millennium Development Goals, backing Christian World Service appeals, sponsoring third world hospitals or Aids and malaria programmes.

Our vision is to represent Christ and serve the community. In so doing we are bearers of the Gospel And the Gospel by definition is "good news" but not just for us at church. It is good news for the world.

Conclusion

The Wesleyan tradition has a global reach. I've been quoting John Wesley a bit in this series of messages because he is inspirational. Perhaps one of his most famous quotes is, "I look on *all the world* as my parish." This is a great slogan and by itself is a nice sound-bite, but the whole sentence goes like this "I look on all the world as my parish; thus far I mean, that, in whatever part of it I am, I judge it meet, right, and my bounden duty, to declare unto all that are willing to hear, the glad tidings of salvation."