

St. Margaret's Uniting Church

Mooroolbark

Sunday 7th May, 2017

4th Sunday of Easter

Holy Communion

EPISTLE READING *Acts 2:42-47 Life among the Believers*

GOSPEL READING *John 10:1-10 Jesus the Good Shepherd*

REFLECTION ON THE SCRIPTURES

We don't make much of a fuss about the work we do within the Uniting Church. How much is really known about things like food assistance, housing assistance, working with folk who have mental health struggles, care for those with disabilities and those who are aged?

Who what faithful people from this congregation do? Who knows or even takes notice of our church lobbying for just outcomes for those on the margins – in Australia, and overseas? Who knows the work done with Aboriginal people; the work done for Asylum Seekers; the work done to keep our leaders accountable for policies that harm and hinder? Who knows of the generosity of our people – in giving and sharing for the sake of the gospel?

One of the problems we face as a church is that few know and few even care. And we see the impact of it in a declining church – one that seems incapable of attracting the energy of youth or passionate exemplars of the good news of Jesus Christ. Even workplaces speak these days of evangelists of their services or products. But I wonder if we lag behind through a cultural cringe about these things.

Rev. Ravanel Weinman made a comment this week about disciples leaving the church. There are many reasons why people leave, but he

speaks of the Western Church as being located in a secular, hedonistic environment. “We’ve got it all! Who needs God?”

Indeed, we have got it all.

Sometimes we see this by contrast. When a catastrophic event happens – like the attack on the twin towers of 9-11; or more locally the devastation of the Black Saturday bushfires – at times of crisis, there is a need for all of us to find comfort, a sure foundation, hope and a sense we are not alone. And this need drives many to find themselves back in a sustaining church community, even if for just a short time.

The church certainly has done wonderful things in times of crisis to share the love of God that we know through Jesus Christ. In response to Black Saturday, chaplains and others were an embodiment of the 23rd Psalm.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

*He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.*

*He leads me in right paths
for his name’s sake.*

*Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.*

This was done in many ways beyond the formal work of chaplains and counsellors. Emergency meeting and sleeping places were set up. Community meals helped fractured towns and villages maintain a sense of identity and offered support for years after the fires. Crews of faithful people helped rebuild fences so that farmers at least had a chance to get back to a productive life.

Let alone the more typical church offered by the church for those in grief.

Perhaps it is not the role of the church to proclaim how good we are via billboards or media opportunities. Perhaps the real work is done away from the spotlight in the countless small and quiet places that you and I inhabit. If that is true, we must never lose sight of the importance of encouraging one another in the name of Christ.

When Ravel was sharing his reflection about those leaving the church, he noted that it has always been like this. It is mentioned in John's gospel that many of his disciples turned back. Jesus asked the twelve, 'Do you also wish to go away?' And Simon Peter reminds us of the source of our life, our encouragement, our reason for being here today. 'Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the holy one of God.' (John 6:66,67)

The story from Acts about the early church shows that they wholeheartedly believed this to be true. If you sense we pale by contrast, remember that we are called to remember that Jesus is the gate, the way the truth and the life. We are to be faithful to his call upon us. And that is not the same thing as being successful in numbers or in monetary terms, or through promoting our brand.

We are called to be faithful.

'Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the holy one of God.'

The early church has some notes about what it looks like to be faithful. I will give them in point form, and as you hear them, think about how they might apply for you personally, and in your family life; but also how these relate to us as the body of Christ that meets together here.

The early church was a LEARNING CHURCH – discovering the unsearchable riches of Christ.

The early church was a SHARING CHURCH. Everybody brought something to share, as they were able to afford it.

The early church met to BREAK BREAD TOGETHER. Let us break bread together with the Lord.

The early church was a PRAYING AND WORSHIPPING CHURCH. They persevered in prayer and worship.

It is hard to hear of the success of the early church, with many being added to their number. But remember that there are more than 2 billion followers of Jesus Christ. Remember too that success (in whichever form we measure it) belongs to the power of the Father, the movement of the Holy Spirit, and the life offered by Jesus Christ.

For us, it is actually very simple. It is the call to be faithful - faithful to learning, sharing, praying, and worshipping; faithful to the breaking of the bread.