

# Sermon at St Margaret's Uniting Church

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Pentecost 19 – 15<sup>th</sup> October 2017

*[These notes are in précis form rather than verbatim. Prepared in advance as 'notes for preaching', they may not reflect exactly what was preached. Preaching is peculiar speech, a dynamic form of communication that needs to be open to the leading of God's Spirit, faithful to the Biblical text, and mindful of the hearer's attention].*

## Introduction

Most of you will be aware that I am a 'fill-in' minister this morning, owing to the Rev Arnie's secondment to another role for several months. Arnie asked me to conduct the baptisms this morning, which I was happy to do. As it seemed to make sense for me to lead the whole service I offered to do that. However, I almost changed my mind when I first read through the Lectionary readings for today – almost ! Let me explain:

Each week there are four (4) readings prescribed. But we do not always read all four. Mostly the focus is on only one or two of the readings. Today readings:

**Exodus 32:1 – 14.** For several weeks now we have been attending to the **Sacred Stories** of the Jewish-Christian traditions from Exodus. We have been reminded that God heard the cries of the Hebrew (Jewish) people in slavery. They were given a leader – Moses. They were liberated from slavery. On the way they were provided with food – meat and bread, and also water in the wilderness. Now, the ungrateful escapes decide they want a God they can manage for themselves – to be in their control. They melted down their jewelry and made a Golden Calf – an idol. This was the very low point of this part of the **Sacred stories**. Disappointing !!!

**Psalms 106:1 – 6, 19 – 23.** The second reading is usually from the collection of hymns, prayers and liturgies that we call the Book of Psalms. We have not read today's passage, but we did use the opening words as the refrain for our Prayer of Adoration – **Praise the Lord. O give thanks to the Lord for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever.** Had we read on we would have soon come across a section that records the

story of the Hebrew people and the Golden Calf – with shame, lament and confession. And it goes on to lament that this pattern of idolatry continued among God's people over the generations. Fortunately, the Psalm ends with an earnest prayer to be saved from such behaviour, and a joyous acclamation of praise – ***Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel.***

**Philippians 4:1 – 9.** In our readings from the New Testament Letters (the third reading) we have been reflecting upon Paul's esteemed joy and love for the Christian community at Philippi in Macedonia – a congregation he founded about a decade before this letter. As he draws the letter towards a close, he affirms the Philippians to be his 'joy and crown.' And then he interrupts his closing affirmation and blessing with a brief but very direct challenge – there is conflict between some of the local leaders. Paul bluntly tells them to sort it out by having the same mind - in Christ. And if they can't work it out themselves, others are instructed to help them. Fancy that – and affirmation and rejoicing – marred by conflict in the church leadership! Could you imagine such a thing? (I can!).

Before turning to the Gospel reading, a story: I attended my first Methodist Conference in 1967 (50 years ago this month). During the ministerial session the President congratulated one of the older ministers on the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his ordination. In his reply the elderly minister made a confession to his fellow ministers. He explained that some decades earlier he had acquired a loose-leaf copy of the Bible. He whispered into the microphone: "***and on more than one occasion I have been tempted to lose a page or two***"! I felt just a little like that with today's Gospel reading. But decided, instead, to wrestle with the text.

**Matthew 22:1 – 14.** Someone told me recently that it is better to forget Paul and concentrate on Jesus. Well Yes, but consider this passage. According to Matthew, Jesus told this parable: A king invited a lot of guests to an extravagant wedding feast; but they all come up with excuses why they cannot attend – even killing some of the messengers. So the king is outraged and gives orders for the invitees to be killed and their homes destroyed. And then he gave orders for all and sundry from the streets to be invited in their place. And then, according to Matthew, there is another twist – one of the rounded-up guests from the streets and byways is found not to be wearing appropriate wedding clobber – and the king orders him to

be bound, and thrown out – not just on to the streets where he came from, but to a place of “*weeping and gnashing of teeth*”.

Well that doesn't sound very nice! Nor does it sound like Jesus. So what have we to do with this rather awkward passage from Matthew's Gospel?

Let me share how I approach it – with some useful background information: Each of the four NT Gospels was composed in order to allow particular Christian communities to 'hear' the word of Jesus being addressed to their own context. And the context was different for each community. Only Matthew and Luke of the NT books deal with this parable (Luke 14:15 – 24). It also appears in the non-NT *Gospel of Thomas*. But only Matthew includes the last bit about the man from List B being thrown out because he was not wearing the correct clothing. So why does Matthew include it?

It is likely that many of the sayings of Jesus, including his parables, were circulated in some written form ('Q') and Matthew and Luke both used these for their own purposes. Jesus' original parable was probably intended to contrast the 'religious' leaders with those whom Jesus was inviting into the realm of God's grace. Luke was writing for a Christian community made up of mainly of Gentiles (non-Jews) and this parable has been adapted to affirm their place within the purposes of God's grace. Matthew, on the other hand, was composing a message for a very different setting. It is commonly recognized that his community was mainly made up of Jewish Christians who had escaped to Northern Syria following the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple (70CE). Some non-Jews had been welcomed into this community, and may even have outnumbered the Jewish Christians by, say, 85CE, when it is likely this Gospel was published. And it is probable that Matthew adapted Jesus' parable to address a situation where some of the late-coming members of the community were not being serious enough about the discipline of the Faith – were presuming too much on the grace that had been extended to them.

One of the features of Matthew's dealing with the parables of Jesus is that he tells them in such a way that they often turn out to be *allegories*, rather than parable. I am confident that Jesus told parables – stories with one or two major points, usually in the form of *compare and contrast*.

Unfortunately, Matthew use of allegory leads the reader to connect the various characters with particular people or groups – and in today's

readings, the Angry King is clearly representative of God. I don't think that Jesus intended this. Luke's account seems to reflect Jesus' intention. But Matthew seems to have found it helpful, in his community context, to be more pointed – and it is this that is particularly challenging for us.

Well – four difficult readings. Thank's Arnie!

When I was in my early thirties I became the regular morning preacher at Wesley Church Melbourne. One of the disciplines required of me was to have a sermon title worked out by Wednesday midday – to be advertised in the *Sun*, the *Melbourne Age* and on the *Notice Board* in Lonsdale Street. I was contemplating this during the past week and decided that if I had been required to do so for today, my title would simply be '**Stuff Happens**'.

**I now want to reflect a little more on the theme – presuming too much on God's grace.**

Grace is a major theme in our tradition – grace meaning God's initiative in love and forgiveness in advance of our apprehension of it. It even shapes our liturgy – the order in which we do things. For example, in the baptism liturgy this morning. Did you notice that the questions and responses of the parents and congregation took place after the children were baptized; not before as some form of prerequisite. This symbolized baptism as a sign of God's gracious initiative – and our response to that grace.

In two weeks time we will be commemorating 500 years since Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenburg, Germany (31 October 1517). This act sparked off the Reformation and the Protestant Movement. The central point of Luther's 95 theses was the Grace of God; God's grace as the basis of a living and faithful relationship with God. Grace as the foundation - obedience, faithfulness, good works as a response to God's grace, not as the pre-condition. This is liberating!

Many people who don't practice the Christian faith are yet attracted to this notion of God's grace. Think of how many times the song, **Amazing grace**, is sung (or played) at weddings, funerals, public occasions of grief and lament. **Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.** This hymn is autobiographical and reflects the time when the slave trader, John Newton, called out to God in a tremendous storm at sea. Having been saved from the storm he committed his life to serving God as a Christian minister – serving as priest and pastor of a very poor

parish in inner London well into his old age, by which he was physically blind. Having apprehended God's grace he did not presume upon it, but spent his remaining like responding to it in faithful service.

Recently I have been re-reading some of the books I read early in my preparation for ministry. Some fifty years on, in some instances, I realize how much my earlier reading has shaped my thinking and vocation as a minister. And in re-reading some, I have come to a clearer understanding of what it means to live in response to God's amazing grace.

One of these books was ***The Cost of Discipleship***, by the German pastor and theologian **Dietrich Bonhoeffer**. Inside the front cover I have recorded that I purchased this book from the Presbyterian Bookroom in Collins Street, Melbourne; and commenced reading it on the 5<sup>th</sup> of August 1965. This book was first published in English in 1948. Bonhoeffer was imprisoned during the latter part of the second world war for his part in a failed attempt to overthrow Hitler and the Nazi party. He was executed in April 1945, aged 39 (8 weeks before I was born).

I can sometimes recall the opening sentences of some of the early books I have read. Chapter One of **Bonhoeffer's *The Cost of Discipleship*** was, and remains, most challenging:

*"Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of the church. We are fighting today for costly grace"...*

And later: *"Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field..."*

*Grace is costly because it calls us to follow (to obey); and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ.*

God's amazing grace is at the heart of our life in Jesus Christ. It is the foundation of Christian discipleship. It is signed in our baptism – even before we can apprehend its meaning.

And our life in Christ is a life of responding to such amazing grace.

Matthew has challenged us with his rather clumsy allegorizing of Jesus' parable – but he does have a point! God is gracious, but we must not presume upon such grace, for it calls us to a life of joyful yet sometimes challenging obedience in response.