

Word & Deeds

Pentecost 15 – 25th September 2011

Reading:

Matthew 21:23-32

Simple story : parable of two sons
One seemingly cheeky, uncontrollable - Will you help - no way
But later the father looks up and there he is working.
The other son - yes dad no dad three bags full dad.
Then does what he wants.
The proof of the pudding is in the doing.
Like dancing - learn the theory all you like - but you need to dance.
Like reading Shakespeare - you can read and read but makes no sense.
Act it out! The understanding comes in the drama!
Like reading the Bible - you can read and read but makes no sense.
Like my preaching.
We need to practice what we preach.
Youth Bible Class at Albury:
No point coming to Church unless you are prepared to live it.
How have you been able to practice what we learn here?
Same question to you.
Sunday Worship need not to be passive - needs to get you in on the act.
So later, I'll give you the opportunity to get into the act. So don't say you haven't been warned!

God's Healing Presence

Reading:

Exodus 17:1-7

Have you ever been in a place where you've wondered why and how on earth you got there? If you have then you will have some sympathy with the Israelites in this morning's reading. I can remember twice in my ministry having similar doubts as the Israelites. I too was on a journey, believing that God was leading to a new place. The first time was in my first parish at Ballarat when things started to go wrong with one of my daughters left in Melbourne. I remember thinking - why on earth was I in Ballarat when my daughter was in trouble in Melbourne. Maybe I had made a mistake, maybe God had made a mistake. Maybe it would have better if I had not disrupted my family's life to become a minister. So like the Israelites I had a question for God in the face of hard times. "Is God among us or not?"

Similarly when I first came across the water to Launceston, again away from my family, after a couple of, this time, minor incidents I was asking the same question. "Is God among us or not?"

And yes, like the Israelites, I had enough proof in my life of the constancy of God's presence, but when things go wrong you sometimes wonder and maybe, like the Israelites, you grumble aloud. Some people call it lamenting.

The Israelites for their part had been liberated from slave drivers in Egypt. God had brought them safe through the waters with Moses as leader.

But the people forgot, with rose-coloured glasses they longed for the fleshpots of Egypt. All this despite having the presence of God among them leading by day with a cloud and by night with a pillar of fire. And then again when they wanted food, there was manna and quails. And in this reading water is the issue, so Moses, as an object lesson that was to be missed by his people, taps the holy mountain, Horeb or Sinai, with the **same** staff he had opened the waters of the Nile for a their escape.

And in my better moments I too marvel at God's provision in my own life and in the life of my family, but it is easy to lose perspective when you are in a hard place, and it is easy to complain and yearn for the good old days. We do it in the church all the time!

And at Synod we asked the same question in the face of hard times for the church, for there are many stories of doom and gloom around for our church. Declining and ageing congregations, retiring ministers, some of whom are suffering from depression in the face a church no longer powerful in our society. And the question is whispered, "Is God among us or not?"

Well I'm here to tell you that in the Uniting Church Synod of Victoria and Tasmania, despite the gloom, God is truly among us. God was there at Synod in the many stories of God's grace, a grace that brings healing and life.

There in the children's author, Kate Wilson, two children's books, "Black Saturday was my dad's birthday" and "Can we go home now?". Both books were financed by the Uniting Church's Share Appeal, and both books have been used in disaster recovery in Australia and around the world. The author gave us a complete reading of her second book, a combination of her journal entries over the 18 month after her family had lost everything, and her son Kirk's question, "Can we go home now?" At Synod she thanked the church for pulling her out of the darkness in publishing the books that have gone on to pull many others out of their darkness.

"Is God among us or not?"

Then there was the good news that our church is about to appoint a chaplain to work with the asylum seekers arriving at Christmas Island, bringing a Christ presence to people who have gone through hell. And closer at hand there is the large number of Uniting Church members preparing to help those asylum seekers who are starting to arrive at Pontville. "Is God among us or not?"

Then there is the story of the Filipino pastor, Berlin Guerrero, whose gentle voice provided a chilling contrast to his tale of torture and false imprisonment in the Philippines, who

thanked us at Synod for our prayers and letters that reassured him that he was not forgotten by God or God's people. The Uniting Church's interest saved his life and the life of many others in the United Church of Christ in the Philippines.

"Is God among us or not?"

And most moving of all for me was the opportunity in small groups to do three things: firstly to remind ourselves of the times the church was a healing agent in our lives, times when God reached us through the church in our times of darkness. Then secondly we were asked to find another different group of people to tell about the times we ourselves were the healing agent. And finally of how we all can be agents of healing into the future. And I can tell you that during that exercise God was fully in our midst!

"Is God among us or not?"

So I'm going to ask you "Is God among us or not?". And by way of an answer perhaps in groups of two or three, preferably with someone you do not know well - share with each other a time when healing was brought into your life through the ministry of the church. And if time permits, share a time when you were the instrument of healing.

God is among us, God's spirit comes to refresh our lives with water gushing out of the hard places of our lives to bring healing and new life.

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