

**Pentecost 10 C August 12, 2007:
St Aidan's & Wesley 10.30am: Peter Walker
Hebrews 11. 1-3 & Luke 12. 32-40**

Along with three other members from our Wesley congregation, I had an interesting experience last Thursday evening.

We were at the National Press Club when the Prime Minister and Mr Rudd addressed, those of us in the room and many thousands of Christians who were watching via a live web cast in their churches or homes. The two leaders had been invited to speak about issues of concern for Christians in Australia. Many topics were discussed - and that was good to see. They spoke about:

" The federal intervention in Aboriginal communities, " Levels of aid and assistance to other countries, " Getting the 'work / family' balance right " the recent industrial relations legislation, " How their personal faith had shaped their approach to political life, and " What are the personal qualities required of leaders and how had Christianity informed these two men in that regard.

Julia Pitman, David Goss and I were there, drinking coffee and eating nice cakes, and listening intently. James Haire was also there - he sat with the Prime Minister and Mr Rudd! I imagine they were eating even nicer cakes than we were. James asked an important question about refugees. He asked how our present efforts might be made more generous, even in this climate of increased concern about border security. Did you know that Australia, following World War Two, took more Holocaust refugees than any other nation? Each of the two leaders addressed this issue, and many others.

Both men seemed at home in the company of church folks. Neither spoke deeply about their personal faith. Mind you, they did say a little.

Mr Howard said his favourite parables are the Good Samaritan and the parable of the Talents. They have both informed his approach to public office. If you are interested in the Prime Minister's interpretations, they go like this: The Good Samaritan had two main points. First, there is dignity in all life. Second, we have an obligation to help those in need. His reading of the lesser known parable of the Talents was more interesting because it was a more novel. He called it the 'free enterprise parable'. We are obliged not to sit on the gifts we have, but to invest and increase them. Work hard; do all that you can with all that you have. That was not new (the Protestant work ethic!) but the phrase 'free enterprise parable' certainly was.

Mr Rudd developed his remarks around the need for vision, summed up by his quoting Jeremiah: "Where they have no vision, the people perish". His vision for Australian society is for a people with "hard heads but soft hearts". The way his faith shapes that vision was similar to the way the Prime Minister embraced the parable of the Good Samaritan. We are called to care for the well-being of others, especially those for whom life is a struggle.

All up, it was good to hear both the Prime Minister and the alternative Prime Minister speaking in these terms, and I thought you might be interested to hear that. We should pray for them, that they will be true to those sentiments.

Among the statements that stood out on Thursday night, was the way both leaders spoke strongly of their view that the influence of Christian faith on Australian society has been overwhelmingly for the good. They referred to past and present examples. Mr Howard and Mr Rudd were wise, of course, to tell a room full of church leaders that there is a strong influence from the Christian faith upon their own political actions and within our society as a whole. But is that still the case?

I do not wish to question the integrity of either man - not at all. But it is easy to lose good intentions unless they are resolutely held... their intentions, and ours. Two million Australians attend church each Sunday. Those are quite large numbers - about 10% of the population. Seventy percent write into the Census that they are Christians. Is that Christian influence real?

Our Gospel reading begins with these words: Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. This speaks to me of the gift of life, of God's grace, of renewed hope. But with every gift comes some level of responsibility. According to Jesus, the responsibility is not insignificant: " give up materialistic ways " be charitable and compassionate towards others " and be among those who are ready to welcome Christ again. Jesus concludes with the famous words: [Make for yourselves] an unfailing treasure in heaven. For where your treasure is there your heart will be also.

Mercifully, whatever inadequacy we may feel in the face of these responsibilities there is also encouragement in this reading.

The word of encouragement is that the kingdom of God is entrusted, not to any single individual. The "flock" is not a single sheep. We have others with whom we share the kingdom: others in the present, others in the past, and others in the future. The work we do for God is never ours alone to accomplish. But, nevertheless, we still have work to do.

Archbishop Oscar Romero, the martyred Catholic Archbishop of San Salvador reminded the Church that we are not in charge of the kingdom. We are co-workers, and prophets of a future not our own. He wrote:

It helps, now and then, to step back and take the long view. We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us. No statement says all that could be said. No prayer fully expresses our faith. No confession brings perfection, no pastoral visit brings wholeness. This is what we are about: We plant the seeds that one day will grow. We water seeds already planted. We provide yeast that produces effects far beyond our capabilities. We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. That enables us to do something, and to do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace

to enter and do the rest. We may never see the end results but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker. We are workers, not master builders, ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own.

We are members of a flock. And with that word of encouragement there is also a message of hope. No matter what the responsibilities, there is something immeasurably more. Do not be afraid - for it is the Father's pleasure to give you the kingdom.

It is God's good pleasure to give us a love so deep and a kingdom so great that, to take up the resonance of a favourite hymns, it will take us an eternity to understand it and to express our gratitude. (When we've been there ten thousand years....)

We are in a very fortunate position as people of faith in Australia. We have the freedom to cherish and act on our beliefs, without fear. Looking at a room full of Christian people on Thursday night able to question their political leaders, brought home that privilege - brought home how fortunate we are. Two million Christians in Australia, and however many billion is it around the world; that sound to me like a promise fulfilled. On God's part, at least. A kingdom ,given as a gift; a flock, of which we can be a part. We cannot act for them all, but we can do so for ourselves.

With every gift, comes some level of responsibility.