

## Sermon

Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. - What a lot Jesus packed into those words.

Jesus had sent out twelve apostles to proclaim the good news that he had brought from God to the people of Israel. He set out how they were to behave and how to treat the people they visited. He acknowledged that some people would not want to meet them and in that case they should shake the dust from their feet as they left the house or town. He said they might even be flogged for what they had to say.

We have tended to assume that of course people welcomed Jesus. But no. not then and not now either. Look at Mosul – a city which had one of the oldest Christian communities in the world and yet now the Christians have been almost all driven out or killed.

And even here, how much are we Christians welcomed in Australia today? In recent years, the public has become aware of the failings of each of the churches as shown in the hearings of the Royal Commission into the abuse of children. In the current issue of Insights, Rev Niall Reid says that when he started in ministry near the beginning of the Uniting church, people had a real sense of trust in the clergy. Now people are suspicious. If you heard a recent episode of the ABC radio's program "God forbid", you will have heard the panel talk of the way it is now common to talk in terms of "coming out" as a Christian in the workplace or even in the family. For many it is too difficult to admit to being Christian as the reaction is likely to be that they must be anti science and not very bright. Jobs can be threatened. And yet, we do come to church and we should not be afraid to acknowledge it.

In days gone by, going to church was a normal thing for many. It formed the basis of social life in many towns. Those times are long gone and those who continue to attend church do so because they have some degree of Christian faith. We have to be very thoughtful in the way we behave and interact with others because whatever we do we are representatives of Jesus and so also of God. And if we are representatives of Jesus, how do we know what he would do and say? The answer is we read and study and worship and pray and we keep on doing those things day in day out. As the American Benedictine nun, Joan Chittister has said in her book *The Liturgical Year*, the liturgical readings and celebrations throughout the year take us over the life of Jesus. We celebrate Christmas and Lent and Easter and Pentecost and various other events. If we worship each week we will have a drip feed of the life and teaching of Jesus.

The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams said in his book "Faith in the Public Square" that "A religious life is a material life. ... living religiously is a way of conducting a bodily life. It has to do with gesture, place, sound, habit – not first and foremost with what is supposed to be going on

inside" (p313) He went on to write of the work of a Dutch woman, Etty Hillesum who died in a concentration camp in 1943. She had written shortly before her death "God is in safe hands with us despite everything" Rowan Williams response to that is "to see that what matters is not that you are ... safe in the hands of God, but that God is safe in your hands." (325)

Is God safe in our hands? Do we represent God well?

Paul understood that many people, including those who tried very much to be good Christians, failed to live in the way that God wanted. In his letter to the Romans, he spoke of the way in which people can be slaves to sin.

Temptations are all around. Other people behave in ways that are not good but they are presented as being fun or with it. Some even believe that they are doing right.

Recently I watched DVDs of the old TV series Barchester Chronicles. The main characters are clergy and their families in a cathedral city of Victorian England. The sense of entitlement to prize positions in the church is clear among some. The horrible Obadiah Slope, Chaplain to the Bishop wants to marry a wealthy widow – not for love but money. And so forth. They are exaggerated of course to make a point but it still happens in society – we have only to look at the pay rates of some business heads and to hear the justifications given for such immense wealth. And to meet them you would probably say they were good people. It is so easy to be drawn into wrong ways of thinking and living.

Paul told the Romans that when they were baptized as Christians, it was as though they died to the old way of life and took on a new way. As Christians they were subject to the love of God, not laws. Laws can be broken but it is another thing altogether to reject love and turn back to the old ways. In the love of God we learn to give love to others. Everyone is important to God – not just the smart folk or the rich or the young and fit but all including the poor and elderly and sick and those living on the street. God's love is for everyone so when we follow God, our love is for everyone too. Love does not indulge in corruption. This new way of living is something to rejoice in.

Joan Chittister and Rowan Williams combined to write a book "Uncommon Gratitude: Alleluia for all that is ". They can rejoice in the difficult things in life, the sad times as much as the happy because God is with them. They recognize that we all fall short of the ideal but that we keep going and give our lives to following Jesus.

Rowan Williams comments on the way in which Jesus brought people to accept that they needed to change. One example he gives is that of Zacchaeus the tax collector who had taken more money than he should. Rather than berating Zacchaeus, Jesus invited himself to dinner. Zacchaeus, already impressed by Jesus' reputation as a man who was not afraid of God or of other people, felt ashamed and recognized that he had to change his ways. He saw in Jesus, the way a truly human person could be. (p63)

Don't think that to be a true disciple of Jesus, you have to be meek and holy to all you see. Saintly behavior can come from the most unlikely

personalities. Williams gives the example of Desmond Tutu who is definitely not meek or self-effacing but rather someone who displays a kind of "holy egotism". (p69)

Joan Chittister sums up the book with a chapter on God. One question that often arises is how can God allow suffering to happen – especially when it is on a massive scale from war or natural disaster. Joan says: "The answer is almost too obvious to bear. It is the spiritual consciousness that having made a world, having given it everything it needs to continue, having brought it to the point of abundance and possibility and dynamism, God left it for us to finish. God left it to us to be the mercy and the justice, the charity and the care, the righteousness and the commitment, all that it will take for people to bring the goodness of God to outweigh the rest." (p191)

God left it to us. Do we take on the challenge that God and Jesus have set? Don't be overwhelmed by the responsibility. As Jesus said, even a cup of cold water given to someone in need is an act of God.

Sometimes we are so overwhelmed by the situation in the world that we are tempted to give up and retire into a cosy retreat. We are tempted to think that our contribution is so small that it can do nothing so just enjoy life as best we can. But that is not what followers of Jesus do. We keep on keeping on. We care for those in need, we fight against injustice, we do all we can for God's creation. In other words, we represent Jesus and God to other people so that they also can come to understand the wonderful loving and caring nature of God.

Amen.