

Sermon Notes

St Mark's Anglican Church
South Hurstville

Lent 2
4 March 2007

Preacher
The Reverend Chris Albany
Rector

Readings: Genesis 15.1-12, 17-18; Psalm 27; Philippians 3.17- 4.1; Luke 9.28-36

Annual Vestry Pastoral Address

Barbara Booth, Church Warden has summarised our latest National Church Development survey results in today's Connections. She says:

This was the 7th since we started the NCD process of thoughtful reflection and action about how we can best grow and prosper as a church in today's world – being the body of Christ in South Hurstville. During this time, a changing sample of parishioners involved in key church activities have given remarkably constant patterns of responses. This gives us great confidence that the survey process is accurate. And we should celebrate that we remain among the healthiest churches across Australia, with robust quality scores for Gift-Oriented Ministry, Loving Relationships and Empowering Leadership. We are doing OK in Inspiring Worship Services, Functional Structures and Holistic Small Groups, and again we are weakest in Passionate Spirituality and Need-Oriented Evangelism. This repeating pattern suggests that we should delve more deeply into the thoughts and feelings that underlie our responses to some of the survey questions. The new Parish Council will be taking this up and we have some ideas for exploring some of the patterns we see repeatedly.

Barbara then goes on to challenge us by saying:

Einstein said that insanity is doing the same thing and expecting different results, so be prepared for some changes! But also be reassured that we will not lose sight of the core values and traditions that make St Mark's so precious and strong. The challenge for Parish Council in 2007 will be to find new ways to stimulate and challenge us all to respond to God's love for us by sharing it with others.

That is a huge and crucial challenge for us – our long term viability as a parish may well depend on how successfully we can meet it. I say that not to be alarmist, but to hopefully convince you of the urgency and importance of the challenge and to stimulate you to look forward to the year ahead. We could be in for some interesting and exciting times as we build on our strengths and find new ways of experiencing and sharing God's presence in our lives and world.

Be assured and never lose sight of the fact that St Mark's has very real strengths. Since coming to St Mark's 17 months ago these have become very apparent. Not surprisingly they are reflected in the NCD survey results. Chief amongst these is the way so many people are prepared to use their gifts and abilities to share in responsibility for the life and leadership of so many aspects of our shared community life. Not to so that we are perfect – indeed this is something that will need to increase as I focus more of my time on the key areas we are beginning to identify as priorities for the next year or so.

Our music and liturgical worship is another strength – and is an area that has rightly taken time and energy this past year as we have made the transition from Kerith and Ann's ministry to that of Chris and Lois. Others contribute significantly to our corporate worship life as they read, pray, serve, lay assist, decorate and clean the church and its furnishings. Here I single out Bruce Cooke who prepares most of our special liturgies and who has been and continues to be a huge support for me.

Only yesterday at Dorothy's 70th birthday celebrations I overheard someone saying that for them one of the great things about St Mark's is the way people care and support for each other. That is particularly true of those who have been part of St Mark's for some time – we need to build on that and ensure that it becomes the experience of newer members too. Can I encourage you to try and make sure you spend time

after church speaking to at least one person that you don't know particularly well as well as your particular friends? Don't forget those who because of age or infirmity have to sit and can't move around – it sometimes seems to me out of the corner of my eye that they are left to themselves. We have a solid core of older people, who have much wisdom and experience to share with us; this includes those who live at Mary Andrews Village. Understandably they at times need particular support and care, so it is good that 8 or 9 people are participating in the Pastoral Care Training at the Village most of whom are also giving of time in support of the residents on a regular basis. As we build a network of care and support this also will allow me to refocus my time in other areas.

Barbara Booth says, *“Einstein said that insanity is doing the same thing and expecting different results, so be prepared for some changes.”* That is because the NCD results over the past few years show quite clearly that we have some sticking points that are inhibiting our growth as God's people in this place. Expect to hear more about these sticking points over the next weeks and months – they lie in the area of our lowest two quality characteristics Passionate Spirituality and Need Oriented Evangelism. As I have looked at and reflected over the NCD survey results it seems to me that at heart these sticking points focus around our experience of God. As a community we seem to be light on in the area of our experience of the power and gifts of the Holy Spirit in our lives and the empowerment and enthusiasm this provides for living out our faith in the world.

Strangely enough this is the very focus of our readings today: all 4 of them each in their own way speak of an encounter with God which is life changing, transforming, encouraging and leads to empowerment. (Not strange at all – just another sign of God at work God-incidents I call them)

- Abram has a vision of God and is promised that though childless he will have descendents beyond number and Abram is enabled to believe despite his old age
- The Psalmist talks of seeking the face of God – God is not distant and impersonal – but to be known and experienced as the one who is the stronghold of life, who provides protection and shelter in times of trouble
- Paul in writing to the Philippians speaks of the transforming power of Christ in the believer's life enabling him/her to stand strong in their faith and Christian life
- And then in the Gospel passage we have the event we have come to call the Transfiguration – an experience of God's closeness and glory which serves to encourage firstly Jesus for the journey that lies ahead as he turns his face to go to Jerusalem with all that lies in store for him there, but which also in the hindsight of the resurrection serves as another proof to the disciples of who Jesus is and so a source of strength and encouragement to follow on the way.

Collectively our readings today are reminding us that our God is to be known and experienced, not necessarily in dramatic, earth shattering ways but never the less in ways that are very real and have the potential, if only we recognise them for what they are of being life affirming, transforming, strengthening. The Lent study book 'Every Day with Jesus' takes up the issue with two of its focus questions for this week:

- When, where or how have you encountered the wonder or mystery of God?
- Name a moment(s) in your life when you have been aware of the presence of God.

For example, one of the people in one of the Lent Study Groups this past week, lets call her Mary (not her real name) in response to these questions spoke of when she was sitting her Driver's License Test when in her 30's 48 years ago. Normally at such times she became very nervous and her mother suggested she have something to fortify her – a good shot of brandy or whiskey, however Mary declined saying she felt strangely calm despite it being very important that she get her license. She said she had a deep sense that God would get her through and despite the fact that most people failed the first time round she sailed through the test with uncharacteristic calm and passed with flying colours. Mary said this had made a lasting impression on her, reinforcing her trust and confidence in God. My own experience has been that so often God seems to have helped my path cross with others at just the right time – for example in hospital corridors when working as a hospital chaplain. At first might seem to be a co-incidence but has happened so often I prefer to call them God-incidence.

I encourage you to reflect on those questions and to share your answers with someone else this week. If your answer to both is I have not had such an experience then come and talk with me so we can explore it together. It's as we share our experience of God's presence and activity in our lives that we encourage and support each other, but also I believe we will more and more find ourselves able to share it with those who do not yet know the incredible difference of life lived in intentional relationship with God.

I must finish in a moment but before I do I want to say something about the year ahead and the areas of priority that I have alluded to and which will require some changes in what I focus on and how I spend my time. Two key areas: looking outwards; and younger families. These past 17 months have been a time of consolidation, time now to take up challenge to be more outward looking:

Younger families: we hope to strengthen our Pre School Kindergarten links; Events already planned include the Barbecue on 31 March; Trivia night; and the Fete.

Another target group are Baptismal families: next Sunday there is the Pool party and we will also offer a Parenting Education Course.

Christmas service attendance is a source of encouragement– I hope we can establish a regular monthly informal service this year – it will need a small planning group. Inevitably there will be changes to the 9.45am Sunday service as we make it more participatory. Budget provides for employment of a part-time staff member to assist with the support and nurture of younger families. Please pray about that, that we might be guided to find the appropriate person(s) perhaps from within the parish community.

Outreach to the local community: already there are two things proposed – more will no doubt arise as the year progresses:

- A Pre-election meeting with the candidates forum is planned with the other churches of the area.
- EcoChurch – environmental project planning meeting this Wednesday night.

Let me return to focus of the sermon – our experience of God. We can develop all the programs and activities in the world – they of themselves will be of little value – external and surface if not undergirded by inner experience and conversion based on our encounters with God and experience of God's continual presence and transforming love in our lives.

Let us pray:

Take our hands and work through them

Take our lips and speak through them

Take our minds and think through them

Take our hearts and set them on fire with love for thee O Lord our strength and our redeemer. Amen.