

Tony Kippax' Induction, Geraldine

27 May 2018

Readings: Philippians 4:4-9; Matthew 28:16-20

Loving God, open the meaning of the Bible to us in fresh and exciting way, in Jesus name. Amen

Thank you very much Tony for inviting me to preach on this occasion, an exciting new chapter in the life of this parish as you begin as vicar. I have been lucky enough to get to know Tony on a preaching course and as his supervisor and I know what an excellent priest he is and what a really good fit for this parish.

There can't be many of us who live in this parish who aren't struck by its natural beauty. The rolling hills - rolling all the way up to the mighty Southern Alps. Mountains move us in way that is hard to put into words. When I lived in South Canterbury, a friend and I thought it would be good to climb little Mount Peel and big Mount Peel in one day. Laid out before us that afternoon where the beginnings of Southern Alps in all their splendour but I don't mind telling you that I slept really well that night.

What interests me is that in this afternoon's Gospel Bible reading Jesus and the disciples are up a mountain. It was a mountain in Galilee but it could just have easily been Mount Peel. When God has a special task for people, he often takes them up a mountain. This passage from Matthew is a post-resurrection encounter with Jesus. The Risen Christ is no longer the suffering servant but has been given all authority in heaven and earth. The disciples see Jesus for who he is, for on mountains you can see more clearly.

But what words can do justice to gazing on a mountain. As I reflect on being on Mt Peel and looking at the Southern Alps I am reminded of the words that won a competition and were engraved on the side of the columbarium wall at Christchurch Cathedral. (A columbarium is the place you put deceased people's ashes.) The competition was for 90 characters or less that fitted the very open and very public space on the south lawn close to the road. They needed to honour the Christian faith of the Cathedral and be understood by the city. 137 entries rolled in, some of them funny, some of them deadly serious. The winner was also the shortest.

The anonymous winner wrote: “Let these stones speak of a love that endures forever.” When I think about it, these words are a psalm, a prayer, a statement of faith and a poem all rolled into one. “Let these stones speak of a love that endures forever.”

Mountains move me. Do they move you?

I can't be sure but when God, the mountain maker, set the Southern Alps in place I reckon he had these words in mind. “Let these stones speak of a love that endures forever. “

Today we are being drawn up the mountain by Jesus. Today is a mountain top experience, a new chapter in the life of the parish. When new vicars start there is no shortage of advice. It usually begins with the words “The new vicar should...” and usually what follows is something the last vicar, in the speaker's humble opinion, didn't do. So I'm not going to add my voice to the chorus of what the new vicar should do. But rather my advice is for you, the whole congregation.

Paul in our first reading gives the clue we need. “Rejoice in the Lord,” and in case we have lost the point he says, “Again, I say rejoice,” and a little later in the passage, “In everything by prayer and supplication give thanks...”

I heard once of a congregation that lost its Bible. One morning the reader got up to read. Someone had helpfully been in the church on the Friday and tidied the Bible away. The reader was a bit taken aback, but the vicar was quick on her feet. “We don't have a Bible today it would seem,” she said, “but does anyone have a good news story?” There was a dreadful pause and she wondered if she had done the right thing. Then very slowly and hesitantly a man got up. “I have,” he said. “Please tell us,” the vicar invited. He recounted how he and his wife had just that week had a child born to them. Once he had finished sharing hands went up around the building. There were so many good news stories that the quick-thinking vicar said, “Why not turn to your neighbour and tell them your good news story.” The prayers that day became an offering of praise for the all the ways God was at work in their lives. The communion, a great thanksgiving of joy for all God was doing. As people went out the door they thanked the vicar and said that had been one of the most moving services they had ever been too. Losing the Bible, rather than being a disaster, had been a breakthrough of the spirit.

Now I'm not suggesting for minute that you lose the Bible. But I am suggesting that sometimes we forget that the Bible is good news. That's what the word Gospel means. Sometimes we forget that we gather to celebrate good news. Neither am I suggesting that we don't face into the hard times. Paul was in prison when he wrote, "In everything give thanks..." Notice he says in everything not for everything. At the heart of our Christian life is a deep, profound gratitude. You see God loves us so much he gave us Jesus, and Jesus held nothing back, giving even his own life for us. And after he died, he rose again so we can have an eternal relationship with him, one that gives us new life and hope. To rejoice in the Lord always is not the power of positive thinking, but it is a deep trust in our God who loves us with a love that endures forever. Think about this for a moment. None of us did anything to deserve this gift, the gift of life. None of us have done anything to deserve a world so rich in beauty. None of us have done anything to deserve a parish so rich in ministry, in tradition and courage and a wonderful new vicar and yet God has blessed us with all this and so much more.

Being grateful is a choice. It's choice to acknowledge our God.

Each time we gather we have the Eucharist which means to give thanks. The central prayer of the Eucharist service is the Great Thanksgiving, and the person who leads us is the celebrant as they celebrate God's great love for us. We say thank you over and over again, just the way Christ did on the night that he was betrayed. He took bread and he gave thanks.

Not far from here two men got caught on a paddock with an enormous bull charging down on them. As they began to run one of them called to the other, "We are done for, say a prayer." "But I don't know any." "Anything will do." So, he chanted what his father had always said, "For what we are about to receive may the Lord make us truly thankful." I think that is a good prayer as we gather to induct your new vicar. For what we are about to receive may the Lord make us truly grateful!

Meister Eckhart, the great medieval mystic, said "If we say just one prayer in all our life time and that prayer is 'Thank you God,' then that will suffice."

When we read of the task given to the disciples to go and baptise all the people and make them disciples, it must have seemed so daunting to them. When we think of all that there is to do in God's name in this parish, it too can seem very daunting. But has one commandment ever been so fulfilled. Here we are, 2000 years later on the other side of the world, with a faith that some billion people around the globe share. It can and will be done. If we begin in gratitude and if grace is our default setting then somehow, in God's way, the rest is done too.

I reckon Tony has the best job in the world, to lead us into the grace of gratefulness, to lead us in rejoicing in the Lord always. And you, you have the easiest task in the world - to say just one prayer.

This afternoon these readings and this service have taken us to the mountaintop, to Mount Peel. There we have met the Risen Christ who has re-energised us with good news for all the world, re-energised us to be the people he calls us to be, a thankful people, so that we, like the mountains we adore, we, God's living stones, will speak of a love that endures forever.