

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor—Fourth Sunday after Pentecost—8 June 2008

Rev'd Rob Lamerton

Genesis 12.1-9; Romans 4.13-25; Matthew 9.9-13, 18-26

On Friday, I put petrol in the car (which was pretty empty!). The total came to just over \$95! But then I produced my Woollies card to receive my discount—a whole two dollars! Higher petrol prices, it seems, are here to stay and we will hear plenty of complaints.

But after hearing about the struggles of the Palestinians for peace with Israel and for their land, higher petrol prices seemed to be a small issue. On Wednesday afternoon at 2 p.m., a group of Anglicans from around Canberra gathered with Archbishop Philip Aspinall to hear about his visit to Palestine and Israel last December and to hear more about the Heads of Churches' Statement delivered to the Australian government earlier that day.

I was heartened by our response and by the informed contribution made by our small team. The event heartened and encouraged me as, for the few days before, I had been seriously pondering where we're headed at St Philip's. I started pondering our life at St Philip's when we had only 28 people here at 10 a.m. last Sunday. It seems that our children's ministry is losing steam; Pandora's is beginning a new era; we seem to be taking some time to redevelop our Northbourne Community Centre management and we are not guaranteed funding for next year; and we still await the refurbishment of our toilet block.

So I was feeling that things were stalled, and I began wondering "Where are we going at St Philip's?" In combination with my need to delay my leave, I began wondering about my own role here. In discussion with Sandy, we recognised the need for fresh ideas and vision.

Then, on Wednesday, there seemed to be energy and vision in the Palestine-Israel topic. Archbishop Phillip began by telling us about a small hitch he had experienced at an Israeli checkpoint. For him it was a minor matter, but he pointed out that such things, day after day, week after week, year after year, become frustrating for the Palestinian people as they try to get around the West Bank, their own territory. I believe that there are over 600 such checkpoints on Palestinian territory.

Then there is Palestinian frustration over the continued building of Jewish settlements on their territory, against United Nations resolutions and against peace agreements. And, of course, linking the Jewish areas are priority roads on which Palestinians do not travel.

Then there is the Wall. Look at a map. You will see that the Wall weaves through Palestinian territory separating people from their families and work and also from water!

Archbishop Phillip strongly urged a balanced approach, recognising that we must affirm the peace and security of Israel but, at the same time, advocate for the right of the Palestinian people to a just peace. The discussion led those of us present to think about how we might gather a group to take up this cause of Palestine and Israel. To my mind, a balanced approach would be to support one of the Israeli movements for peace, such as Check Point Watch and a group of ex-Israeli army people who are keeping tabs on human rights issues.

As we ponder these things, which affect Jews, Christians and Muslims, it is appropriate that today we consider the beginning of the story of Abram (later to become Abraham) who is regarded as the father of the faith by Jews and Christians, as well as Muslims. Jews and Muslims see this very much as a physical descent—Jews from Sarah and Muslims from Hagar—but all also see Abraham as the father of the faithful and is the one who represents

faithfulness toward God.

The story is interesting in that although, Abraham is promised “to your offspring I will give this land”, no lines are drawn on maps. The actual extent of ancient Israel is difficult to define. How unlike today.

Wanting to encourage faith among the non-Jews, Paul depicted Abraham as an example of faith to all. It was not the Law that stood Abraham in good stead with God (the Law had not yet been given) it was Abraham’s faith, his willingness to act, to journey in faith and to trust God.

In today’s gospel, Jesus gives a great picture of God’s openness to all people:

- in the call of Matthew,
- in his response to the ruler of the synagogue,
- in his response to the woman with menstrual problems, and
- in his response to the young girl.

Matthew, as a tax collector, was classed among sinners. “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” Jesus countered by quoting Hosea, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice,” and by saying that he has come to call not the righteous, but sinners. The calling of this tax collector was a sign of the gospel—that instead of the righteousness that came by obedience to the Law, God *gives* the kingdom to those who have no righteousness of their own.

In fact, as we have seen, Paul points out that even obedience to the law is no guarantee of being right with God; it is *only* by God’s grace!

The second part of the story shows Jesus, having just been in dispute with his Jewish brothers, now being summoned to help one of them. The ruler of the synagogue would have been a very senior person in his community and very much a person who lived under traditional Hebrew law. Yet Jesus has no objection to moving from defending his calling of the sinner Matthew to setting off with this high-ranking traditional Jewish brother. It is this even-handedness that we are asked to put into practice in dealing with the Palestine-Israel question.

Then we have the old and the young woman, the older one, “unclean” because of her menstrual problem. In her healing (which has done sneakily) we see that Jesus alone knows and commends her faith. She would have been barred from participation in social and religious observances, but her faith was evident in her approach to Jesus.

Finally, there is the young woman, the daughter, who represents to me the young and the powerless. I imagine also the pride that had to be overcome by the ruler of the synagogue and concerns about it being a trap for Jesus. Both are issues in the Palestine-Israel confrontation:

- the price of abandoning old long-held notions about who is right and who is wrong, in favour of balance, justice and peace; and
- the need to abandon or overcome fear to deal with those with whom we might disagree.

Well, as you can see, it’s been a challenging week:

- petrol prices,
- thinking about the ongoing life of St Philip’s, and
- being challenged to find a way to respond to the need for a lasting peace and Palestine and Israel.

By the grace of God, like Abraham, we journey on in faith.