

St Philip's Farewell Sermon
11th Sunday after Pentecost
Revd Rebecca Newland
9 August 2015

1 Kings 19.4-8; Ephesians 4.14-24, 25-5.2; John 6.35, 41-51

It is so wonderful to be with you all today in this place. It is day of celebrating and remembering. Next weekend I will be commissioned as the associate priest at Moruya Parish. I will be praying for you and thinking of you as I take up my new ministry. My work at Moruya will be simple parish work. I will only be working one day a week and that is more than enough at the moment. It has been a slow road to recovery of full health and it has been a very challenging journey as David and I have confronted my health issues, an ongoing building project and new possibilities. Yet I have been very upheld in prayer. Thank you, thank you for all your love and support.

On this day I cannot help but think of the day I was inducted as rector of St Philips when Bishop Stuart practically waltzed me down the aisle and placed me in my chair, that one over there, that was originally over there where the side altar now stands.

I didn't say very much that day. I was so delighted to be back at St Philip's, to be part of this wonderful community again. St Philip's was and will continue to be my church home. I know I will have many other church communities that I will love and God willing lead or minister within, but this church family here is my place, my tribe.

On that day almost 6 years ago I do remember saying one thing. I said that I would strive to point to Jesus Christ in all I did. I thought that today I would share with you what Jesus means to me, personally. It is the last gift I can give you from this pulpit. A testimony about my belief and faith in our Lord.

In our Gospel reading we have Jesus talking to his followers a continuation of the bread of life dialogue. Jesus says "I am the the bread of life", Jesus says, "Whoever comes to me will never be hungry and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty".

Jesus is indeed the bread of my life, the nourishment that feeds my soul and being. I have found in Jesus life, teaching, death and resurrection, the way to fullness of life. That is my reality now, or at least most of the time. It was not always so. Before I settled on the way of Christ I tried a lot of other different paths. I tried many things that did not bring me life. They brought more pain and confusion.

One of the saints with whom I identify closely is John Newton, the slave trader who became an abolitionist and who wrote the hymn 'Amazing Grace'. He said "Although my memory's fading, I remember two things very clearly: I am a great sinner and Christ is a great Saviour." First and foremost for me Jesus saves.

I am a great sinner. Jesus is my Saviour.

Sin is an unpopular word but for me it indicates the state of being when in either ignorance or full knowledge I act in ways that cause damage, fracture and fragmentation to either myself or others. It is what takes us into a place of disconnection. Most sin is I think done through pure ignorance. We simply don't know what we do. We act and think unconsciously and reactively and before you know it we have landed in the mire and dragged others along with us.

We act in ways that on the surface seem to help us deal with reality but we and others end up with more pain and distress than before. Sometimes we can act in ways that we know are wrong and potentially damaging but our self-preservation takes over and we put ourselves before others. And then we can feel

guilty, worthless and ashamed and others are hurt and diminished. Make no mistake. Human sin, individually and communally, is destructive and devastating and we all suffer.

Now don't worry I am not going to give you a list of my sins, conscious or unconscious, past or present. Just take my word for it I have done things, many things, I am not happy or proud about and the weight of them could have been too great to bear, way too great to bear, except for one thing. That one thing is the fact and reality of the forgiveness and grace of God that Jesus brought into my life and continues to bring into my life.

The great message of Christ is that God is light in whom there is no darkness at all. That God has infinite love and understanding for us in all our ignorance and weakness. When Jesus died on a cross, sinned against by so many, abandoned and rejected by almost everybody and then came back to offer a message of forgiveness and peace, it frees us, it freed me.

It was for me like a blinding revelation of jaw dropping truth. And what a truth. It saves me from the shackles of my self-condemnation and my despair. It saves me from shame and guilt. It saves me from the hell of my own making and my distorted thinking. It saves me from the lie that I am not enough and not good enough. It brings healing and wholeness. It has meant for me there is no darkness too great to be overcome by God's light. I cannot begin to tell you what this has meant for me but it is what makes me lift my voice in praise and thanksgiving and as the psalmist says, pay my vows to God.

I have found that this gift of light filled redemption is simply waiting if I but believe, if I trust, that God is indeed love as Jesus taught. The light of God's grace and love, taught and embodied by Jesus, is also the light that enlightens our ignorance.

Jesus shines a light on all the layers of our being helping us to become more aware, more awake, more open, less afraid and subsequently, and thankfully, less likely to miss the mark in the future. Jesus saves and Jesus enlightens.

Jesus for me is also the icon of God. As Paul writes he is the image of the invisible God. He is the one who reveals to us the very nature of God and draws us to our true nature for we are made in the image of God. I don't know about you but I carry around quite a few different pictures of myself - mostly given by others. Internalised messages about who I am. My parents gave me the biggest ones and then I have picked up numerous others from the culture I have grown up in. Good daughter, bad daughter, gifted musician, failed musician, good wife, bad wife, wonderful priest, bad priest. All of them are just pictures, projections, illusions on some level. But they are powerful, powerful illusions. They have swung me into pride or self-hatred.

Into bliss or despair. Into self-justification or self-condemnation.

But in Jesus I see who I truly am. He reflects back to me my true nature.

I am the loved child of God. I am Rebecca, one with God and all that is. I am not just OK. I am perfect in my Rebecca-ness. I am enough. In the end nothing else matters.

Whether I live or die, I am. Whether I succeed or fail, live with health or vigour or have another stroke and end up in a wheelchair I will always be a loved child of God and perfect in my Rebeccaness. It is Jesus and his Spirit that shows me this and leads me to this truth.

And whether I live or die, Jesus is the model of how to live or die my human life.

It has been said recently by at least one prominent politician and by everyone I share meal with of late that the world has gone by mad. It is a world of scapegoating, one-upmanship, partisanship, corruption, violence, revenge, fear and resentment and irrational decision making in the face of obvious facts. It's also

a world where we are told every moment of everyday that we need more, have to consume more and that human beings and the earth are expendable. In this world gone mad Jesus shows us something very different.

He models a way that is life-giving for all. It is a way of non-violence, compassion, justice, peace and forgiveness. It is a balanced life with commitment and obedience. It's marked by simplicity and joy, vulnerability and authenticity to just name a few. He models for me how to live the most blessed human life I can. Of course I don't reach his perfection but he gives me a goal worth living and dying for.

Perhaps the thing that Jesus models most powerfully for me is trust. And trust is probably my hardest lesson. In Jesus we see someone who despite all the challenges, the rejection, the despair and what was a certain death trusted God. The only time he showed anything like a lack of trust was on the cross in the last few moments of his life when, as recorded by Matthew and Mark, he called out, 'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?'. But in John's gospel his last words are, "It is finished" and he gives up his spirit to God. In radical trust he surrenders. He gives it all to God and surrenders all he has, trusting to the end.

And this for me is faith. Faith is not nodding assent to some church doctrine with fingers crossed behind our backs. It is not some unfounded belief in a sky fairy who will wave their magic wand and take away my problem. Faith is radical trust. Radical trust is the ability to turn to God, to be centred in God and depend on God in each moment even if we are unsure of the outcome or the goals. Like Oswald Chambers writes, if I can stay in the middle of the turmoil calm and unperplexed, that is the end of the purpose of God. Jesus teaches me that as I see him walking on the waves, no shore in sight, no success, no goal, I see the absolute certainty that it is all all-right, that all will be well and all manner of things will be well, even if turmoil and death follow. For we will be raised up.

It is a message I need to hear over and over again, this message of trust. Perhaps it is a message for this community as I formally leave and you continue your search for a new rector. I hope you will individually and together as a community look to Jesus Christ, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, to guide you into all truth and wisdom, through all storms and doubts. "I am the bread of life", Jesus says, "Whoever comes to me will never be hungry and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty". Dear Friends keep coming to Jesus and find in him all that brings abundant life.

I would like to leave you with a picture and an invitation. For a very long time I have felt called to enter into a life of more disciplined prayer and intentional contemplation. By a long time I mean all my life. In the next few years I plan, God willing, to explore and embrace a prayer life founded on the Benedictine principles of obedience, listening, hospitality and conversion of life. I will be practising the awareness of God and radical trust, such that I listen as closely as possible to God's will in each moment and act from that place. In the middle of my recovery and house building I have begun to do this. The Benedictine nuns at Jamberoo Abbey have a statement about their vocation. It is, "to be Christ praying on the mountain, totally attentive to seeking God". I have modified this for myself - "to be Christ praying in the forest, totally attentive to God".

I am not sure where this will take David and I but I am content to take it one day, one prayer, at a time.

I live right next to a beautiful forest and beach and would like to offer you all an invitation to come and visit. We can give you a bed and some food. We can talk about anything you like and if you are able we can walk in the forest together. Or we can sit by the beach and watch the waves and the horizon. There is one caveat - don't come until next year because we won't have a bathroom until then! But keep that invitation in mind and do not be strangers. I won't be - you will see me around - particular after you have had a chance to break in a new rector!

Thank you for everything, all of you. And finally, especially, thank you to my dearest husband David. I am sure you have worked out by now that he is a bit of saint - well a lot of a saint. Behind the scenes over the last 6 years he has been my strongest support and my best friend - and that's been a blessing for us all.