

He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

Reverend Rebecca Newland

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John 20.19-31

On Friday night, like many of you, I watched the royal wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton. In fact I watched the whole thing from 6.00 pm until around 10.30 pm when they finally appeared on the balcony of Buckingham Palace. It was a beautiful wedding wasn't it? The dress was perfect. The weather was benign. The crowds were peaceful. The Queen was regal and everything went together without a hitch. Even the BBC commentary was perfectly orchestrated. Of course sitting here in Australia in the 21st century I asked myself occasionally—what does all this have to do with my life? Perhaps some of the estimated other 2 billion around the world who tuned in, might have asked a similar question. The Bishop of London who gave the sermon I think nailed it when he said that a wedding was cause for hope and joy. He said, “Many are full of fear for the future of the prospects of our world but the message of the celebrations in this country and far beyond its shores is the right one—this is a joyful day! It is good that people in every continent are able to share in these celebrations because this is, as every wedding day should be, a day of hope.”

It is said that hope is the quintessential Christian virtue. Christian hope is not founded on any human institution—marriage, the monarchy, or anything else—but on the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In the face of ultimate darkness, Jesus rose from the grave and conquered death once and for all. In the place of violence Jesus brings peace. In the crucifixion and resurrection we are shown, at one and the same time, all the mob violence of which humans can be capable plus all the loving forgiveness that is intrinsic to God's very nature. This is indeed an eternal source of hope for all creation. A Christian marriage, including Kate and Williams is meant to shine with this peace, love and hope.

In today's gospel we have one of the resurrection appearances in John's gospel where peace is central. In our reading, Jesus says “peace be with you,” three times. It is the first thing he says both times he appears. It is a powerful greeting after all he had endured and as his followers it must be part of our proclamation and practise. However, in the house where Jesus appears there is a disciple who does not believe. He does not believe that Jesus has indeed risen from the tomb and therefore cannot believe that it is peace Jesus brings.

It is important to note that Thomas did not doubt. Instead he was *apistos*. That is he was untrusting, not-believing. What Jesus says, is blessed are those who have believed or who have trusted. He does not say blessed are those who do not doubt.

We are *not* forbidden to doubt. Doubt is a means of growing and maturing and is a sign of a healthy and robust faith. The question is whether, despite our inevitable and healthy doubts, we will trust. Will we trust God enough to act upon what we understand to be true? Will we trust God that that even in this desperate, and crisis ridden world, there can still be harmony and good? Will we act to live out “Peace be with you”?

Jesus says in John 10:10, “I have come that you may have life in all its fullness.” Will we believe this? Will we trust that “in all its fullness” means harmony between all people, and between people and the biosphere itself? Will we trust enough to act on this and pay the cost of it? Or would we rather have the peace of personal affluence at any cost?

One of the greatest challenges we face as a group of people trying to live together—whether that is in a marriage, a family, a church community like St Philip’s or society at large—is a lack of trust. The rich don’t want to lose their comforts, the poor want to have some comfort, and many people lust after power. But it all comes down, in the end, to trust. It’s not that I don’t want to do the right thing. I just don’t trust that I will not end up in a bad place if I give you more, and I take less.

How much politics is fuelled by lack of trust, instead of seeking the common good? How much of what we call greed, is an inability to trust in God to provide? How much of our worry about the future of the church is really a deficit of faith? How much conflict would lose its impetus if we really had a decent relationship with the person concerned? If I trusted God, and if I trusted you, and all the other people, I would not fear the future. I would not need to acquire and hoard, or to control, because I would know there would be sufficient. I would be “at peace” because I had let go of anxiety and fear and I had trusted.

And there is a vicious circle involved. Because I do not trust you, I cannot achieve community with you. Because I have no community with you, I cannot trust you. I am reduced to some common ground in my own poor tribe, and I’m not too sure about them either. One of the astonishing things about the Royal Wedding was the high degree of trust within the crowd and the participants. Yes there were stringent security measures and armed police but really it was so peaceful. People trusted other people to behave.

Yet trust is of course not simple or easy. For those of us who come from a less than ideal upbringing we might have decided that we could not trust. If we have experienced physical hardship and pain then trust becomes even more difficult. How can we trust the world around us and God when both seem to have failed us?

Trust is also intrinsically involved in our ability to carry out the great commission given to us by Jesus. In John’s version Jesus says to his disciples gathered in that room, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” In verse 31 we find that it is by doing this that we have “life in his name.”

By loving one another as Jesus loves, we reveal God to others; by revealing God to others, we make it possible for them to choose to enter into relationship with this God of limitless love. It is in choosing or rejecting this relationship with God that sins are forgiven or retained. Our mission, therefore, is not to be the arbiter of right or wrong, but to bear unceasing witness to the love of God in Jesus. This is why the mission statement our planning group here at St Philip’s has been working with is about connecting people into a growing relationship with Jesus Christ. In and through Christ we are made one with the God of love.

The planning group, parish council and I have all been considering our future and how we can be faithful proclaimers of God’s Kingdom — how we can grow St Philip’s and build on its extraordinary and unique gifts. We now have a plan and I will be bringing that to everyone in detail at the end of May and through June. It is very exciting! But one of the things that we will all run up against as seek to make that plan a reality is the issue of change and our degree of trust.

This is partly because as people we change slowly. But it is also the case that trusting each other enough to work through the issues is a huge challenge. It is far easier in any congregation to take another path and avoid the dangers and risks of trust. Some clergy bully their way towards what they want. Some give up. Others quietly work to build up the numbers, so that the resistance is finally defeated by the votes. I am very conflict averse so

my fall back position is surrender and run away. Most of us will make mistakes. Gobsmackingly, surprisingly, change management is not a subject during ministry training!

In the end the final question is whether we will all trust the God revealed in Jesus enough to seek community, and live it out. Will you and I trust God's healing and protection enough to risk betrayal by my fellow Christians? Will you and I seek to be transformed and to help others find transformation?

Only when we are all transformed, will there be a real unity. Not only when we stop categorizing and criticizing according to our personal prejudices, which by the way St Philip's does pretty well, but when there is trust, and forgiveness, and letting go, by *all* of us. It includes the fact that I will have to trust enough, and have my relationships sufficiently renewed, to let go of the way I characterise some with whom I disagree. If that kind of community happens, there will be a much more powerful witness. We will feel the wind of the Spirit among us! The world will have something to look at!

The great commission Jesus gives us is not meant to be a burden and a chore. It is meant to enliven and focus us. It is meant to challenge and change us. I think if we can catch the amazing vision of the peace Jesus reveals to us and if we can trust God and each other then we can indeed follow in his footsteps and bring many others into that life-giving relationship with the God he always points to—the God of peace, love and forgiveness. May we catch the vision and find that trust.