

Mission

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
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Romans 10

The first of two talks first given to the Synod of the Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn in September 2011 and represented to the congregation of St Philip's.

When the Bishop asked me to do these bible studies I was quick to point out that I was not a biblical scholar, I didn't have a PhD in anything and I wasn't an academic. I was your common, garden-variety parish priest. However he graciously overlooked these matters and said, that's OK, all I want is two 12 minute homilies on the theme of mission, with a scriptural basis and if you can mention my vision, my dream for the diocese, I would be very pleased. Well to deal with this last request first. The Bishop's dream for our diocese is "I dream of a diocese where the love of Jesus transforms people and communities". What follows is my take on our mission and the Bishop's dream.

Emil Brunner famously wrote that the church exists for mission as a fire exists for burning. If that is true then everything that we Christians do is for mission—our worship, education, welfare, meetings and yes, synod. All the discussion and debate we will have today about the Tri-diocesan agreement is to that one end—God's and therefore our mission. According to Luke, Jesus defined his purpose, as "to preach the good news to the poor, to proclaim freedom for prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed and to proclaim the year of the lord's favour" (Luke 4.18-19). And at the end of Matthews Gospel, Jesus sent his followers to make disciples of all people. The mission of Jesus then is about a profound transformation at the heart of society and in the heart of each individual. As his followers this mission is our mission.

Unfortunately there has arisen an artificial separation between these two aspects of mission, one camp emphasises the priority of people hearing the word of God, becoming followers of Jesus and thereby saving their souls and the other side emphasising deeds of compassion, care and social justice. This bifurcation has played itself out in Anglican polity and history and the way the church conducts it's mission. We can easily go through our synod papers and mark off which organisation emphasises what aspect of mission—individual salvation or social justice—and at times there seems to be no connection between the two.

In the time I have remaining in this talk and the one to follow I want to try and draw these two aspects together, highlighting what is essential to both. For this I think we can do no better than to turn to Paul and the letter to the Romans for Paul was the quintessential missionary and his letter to the church in Rome is his attempt to explain, his reasons for his faith and work, as fully and clearly as possible. I can't look at all of Romans so I have picked two sections, one from chapter 10 and the other from chapter 12.

Leading up to chapter 10 Paul has laid out what he sees as the Good News. He explains that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. Through Jesus comes grace, forgiveness and reconciliation. This gift is for all—gentile and Jew, for all nations and peoples. It is a message of universal salvation. The Greek root of the word salvation means wholeness. Salvation is not exclusively a ticket to heaven or a humanist agenda. It was and is the complete redemption, the healing of the whole of creation, heaven and earth, and it is an ongoing process. Paul tells us that Jesus

Christ who is the way to this reality is present, real and close at hand. It is as simple as what is in our hearts and on our lips. We do not have to climb to the highest heaven by our own efforts or plumb the lowest depths of existence. One way to understand this is that we do not have to be successful, clever, important or succeed at any other 'works'. Nor do we need to delve down into the depths of our being and wallow around in our sin and darkness, wearing sackcloth and ashes as we attempt to make up for our failings. Jesus Christ came down from the highest and rose up from the depths and through his Holy Spirit he is present and available. He is available no matter what we have done or who we are. Through his Spirit we are united to the Creator of all. All one has to do is believe in their heart and confess him as the risen Lord.

"Jesus is Lord" is the primary creedal statement and the ultimate words of life. Karl Barth wrote of this statement of faith in Christ Jesus, "He is the master key which opens every door. He is the wave, which overtops even the highest building. He is the point from which the vast horizon of life is seen from its true perspective.... Jesus is the goal to which all law and all religion move". When someone calls on this ultimate Lord of life then they are saved. In our text Paul goes on to ask, 'but how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?' All this is to say that someone has to tell the story. And just to be absolutely clear I do mean tell the story in words.

And friends we need to hear the story over and over again because we continue to live in a world of violence, oppression and sin, a world where separation from God, neighbour and creation is the default position. I don't need to spell it out for you because you are confronted with it every time you watch the news and read the paper. For millennia we humans have turned away from God and his love. For millennia human societies have created an uneasy peace by finding someone or some group to blame, deride and scapegoat. The age-old stories of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel tell us this is so. We have created a world of them and us where the wellbeing of us always takes priority over the needs of them. We have erected a house of cards based on our dubious agreement that those people or that person is the problem who needs fixing or excluding.

The level of political rhetoric we are seeing at the moment around the government's climate change policy is just one example—from both sides—as is the appalling mess that is refugee policy. In the church we fall into the same trap when the liberal left blames the conservative right and vice versa or when we conveniently find a scapegoat on which to direct our unresolved resentment and fear. This happens in the local church as well as at a diocesan, national or international level. And as we go this merry way the innocent suffer, creation groans and the gospel message is compromised.

Instead, the story of Jesus breaks into this reality. It breaks in like rain on parched land. He walked through our house of cards preaching and practising compassion, love and forgiveness. In the end he became the ultimate scapegoat for all our violence and sin when he was violently murdered on a cross. When he rose from the dead he did not do one of two things—smite the lot of them or run away to an island on the Nile. He stood amongst us and said "peace be with you".

His message is as revelatory today as it was in Paul's day and it is one that reveals both the depth of our sin and the depth of God's gracious mercy and forgiveness. When we get this message, this revelation of the risen Lord who brings peace and forgiveness amidst so much darkness and despair then it leads us into both profound change and eternal life. If you like it is the Word that breaks open our hearts and minds and it is the most powerful story I know because it reveals Jesus to minds and hearts. This revelation reaches into people's hearts and

begins to create a tectonic shift their being. And the consequences can be extraordinary and profound. When Paul met the risen Lord on the road to Damascus his whole life changed, a turn around that radically changed the known world.

Now I could tell you about my own life and how the Risen Lord changed my life. I could tell you about some stories of people in my church and their ministry but to finish this talk I'd like to tell you about someone I met in the Philippines when I was doing research for my master of ministry. David and I spent 4 months living in an Igorot village in the Cordillera studying the community development work of ABM and the local Episcopal church. It was an ethno-historical study and I spent a great deal of time sitting and talking with people and hearing their stories.

The Igorot are the tribal groups of the northern and central cordillera—that is the huge mountain range on the main island of the Philippines. The Igorot were one of the few indigenous groups that managed to hold out against colonisation for literally hundreds of years. The fact that they lived in incredibly inaccessible mountains was the main reason. Another was that they were and are fierce fighters. They were head hunters and they did this not just in battle but as a test of manhood. They are still taking other body parts I believe. Justice is rough in this part of the world and it is very much an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. The innocent are often caught up in this cycle of revenge.

One of the most inspiring people I have ever met was an Igorot man called Philippe. Philippe is a Christian man, a rice farmer with a family of 10 children, all whom he has managed to put through school. In Philippe's village was another man called Marcos who had lost his only son and was unable to work his land. This was compounded by the fact that a boundary dispute arose with his neighbour. In a heated argument the neighbour cut off Marcos's arm with a machete. What would normally happen next is that there would be a blood feud and Marcos' relatives would attack the neighbour and his relatives. Well that did not happen because of Philippe. Philippe cared for Marcos, helped him work his land, dealt with the many legal problems and counseled him not to take revenge. He spoke about the message of Christ and he lived it in his being. When I was sitting with Marcos around his fire he spoke of Philippe with love and affection and he said, "I want so much to kill the man who took my arm, but I know I cannot. I know it will not help. I am a Christian. I must forgive but it is very hard but Philippe is helping me".

Aside from this extraordinary care of Marcos, which has literally prevented scores more violent attacks and bloodshed, Philippe also stands in front of illegal logging trucks who fell trees in the nearby forests. This is not because Philippe is an environmentalist, although I am sure he loves and appreciates creation, it is because the loggers destroy the homes of another oppressed group, the Agtar, a nomadic forest tribe. And so Philippe puts his life on the line for those people. Philippe is also the man in the village who helps coordinate the ABM project—a water project—instead of the women and children walking 5 km's a day to collect water, fresh water is piped into the village from a spring nearby. When I spoke to old men about the coming of Christianity, which has only happened in the last 100 years, and why they were Episcopalians, that is Anglicans, and not something else they said, "well everyone came, but at least they practised what they preached".

Philippe faces many dangers as he witnesses to the Gospel of Christ, from angry warriors with machetes to powerful illegal logging companies with hired thugs. In the diocese of Canberra and Goulburn our problems are a little different. Though perhaps it might feel like that at times! Although it is different, telling the story is a hard call. The message of Jesus Christ has never been wildly popular. And in today's context the gospel message is not appealing at all. We are so focused on entertainment, consumerism and all-encompassing self-

idolatry that we can barely sense another reality beyond it and if we do we doubt its truth. Truth itself is suspect and relativism has stripped the power and heart out of the gospel.

Friends don't be seduced by this sleight of hand. If Jesus Christ is not the goal to which all law and religion move, as Barth puts it, then we might as well pack up and go home. If we are not going to proclaim that Jesus is Lord then we might as well become Buddhists, or hedonists, or anything else. But it is the message that Jesus Christ is Lord that makes ordinary folk into brave saints like Philippe. It is the message that makes the difference. I spent time with Philippe hearing why he did what he did. He did what he did not because he thought it was a good idea, or because it fitted with his career options, or that he would be rewarded. He did it because he knew himself loved and forgiven by God. And it is this knowledge that ultimately changes individuals, relationships and whole communities.