

Anglicare Sunday

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost — Year C — 23 October 2022

Reverend Martin Johnson

Jeremiah 14.7-10; Psalm 84.1-7; 2 Timothy 4,4-8, 16-18; Luke 18.15-30

In 1884 a young woman named Emma Caroline fell and broke her leg. She was a novice at the Community of St Mary the Virgin, Wantage in Oxfordshire. She was looking forward to her profession and had decided to be known as Sister Esther after the Old Testament figure from the book of the same name. After six months in plaster her health had suffered and it was felt that a spell in a warmer climate would help her recover. She was encouraged to spend twelve months in Australia with relatives.

Despite being another country on the other side of the world, Emma could see in Melbourne the same social problems and decided to become involved. She met up with a group of women seeking to help those on the streets. A midnight visit to a Gospel Hall was certainly an education. One of these women wrote: it was the weirdest kind of place, women off the street coming in nearly always drunk, or stupid with opium. They were given strong coffee and something to eat and every now and then a voice called out 'will a Sister lead in a word of prayer?' Then we all sang hymns and someone got up and asked 'Who will sign the pledge?' As they left Emma said, 'We must think out a better way than that.' And a better way they did.

Emma had to wait several years before a sympathetic Bishop in Ballarat received her vows in Profession, she took the name Esther and so in 1888 came into being the Community of the Holy Name. Esther would eventually become the head of the community which worked initially in Melbourne with the Mission to Streets and Lanes, an organisation that would become the beginning of Anglicare.

In our region, a new residential home for girls was purchased by the Anglican Church of Goulburn in 1929 and run by two sisters from the Community of the Holy Name. This was the beginnings of Anglicare NSW South, NSW West, and ACT. 90 years later in 2019 the then Anglicare CEO wrote: At its heart, our mission is the same as it was in 1929, we exist to change the lives of vulnerable children, young people, and their families for the better.

As an aside, in 1975 some of the sisters had decided to retire from their active ministry and test a calling to the contemplative life and in 1990 a group of them Mother Rita Mary, along with Sisters Margery, Clare, and Patience, moved to a property on the outskirts of Wangaratta and formed the Community of Christ the King. I would get to know these remarkable women well, the retreat prior to my ordination to the priesthood was held at their Community House.

Our Church has suffered in recent times because of a culture that was allowed to develop, in some instances children were not cared for, some were abused; the words of Jeremiah rather strike to the heart: Although our iniquities testify against us, act, O Lord, for your name's sake. In our gospel this morning we experience Jesus acting, upending a culture that fails to recognise the place of children, their status in society was pretty much the same as the slave. Clearly on one level Jesus is seeing in children the trust and dependence that are marks of faith, marks of the kingdom. But this not the full story. It's easy to be sentimental about this passage, we've all seen the art that accompanies this text, those Victorian hymns about Jesus and children, the idea of the innocence, faith, and trust of children, but this piety alone gives a veneer on the text it will not stand. Jesus is indignant about the treatment of the children; the language is strong. The passage does not stand alone, in each of the gospels this account of

Jesus gathering children around him is linked with that of man eavesdropping on the scene, a man who is variously described as rich, young, or in charge.

‘We must think out a better way than that’ said those sisters as they encountered the deprivation of inner Melbourne slums and the goodly and godly folk of the gospel hall. That ‘better way’ is given voice by Jesus in his encounter with the ‘certain ruler.’ Clearly goodness is not enough, neither is the keeping of the law, neither of these things will alleviate the issues faced by those children. When the ruler asks Jesus about gaining eternal life, he doesn’t mention faith and trust, his message is simple and uncompromising: Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.

The Kingdom of God . . . heaven is for those who are like children in the ancient world: the poor, the hungry, the dispossessed, those without rights and without any esteem amongst their contemporaries. Jesus aligns himself with these folk and calls upon the rich ruler to do the same. The call is for us today. Luke is the evangelist of social justice, you will recall in the Lucan beatitudes, Jesus says blessed are the poor. This is not spiritual, but material, real poverty.

Jesus was asking the ruler to rethink his ideas of ‘eternal life.’ It is not something for the future, something you will inherit later but something that you are called to be a part of now. Luke’s wonderful parable of the Prodigal Son is an example of his reworking of inheritance. Both the prodigal and his older brother are reminded that their inheritance is there now, for both of them, what is mine is yours. In the words of that great Easter hymn: Now is eternal life if risen with Christ we stand! It is not all about the end of time.

Anglicare today works alongside those experiencing need, it is complex and demanding. They are seeking a better way a new culture and ask us to join with them in their mission. Part of that better way is for us to pray for their ministry and mission, yes, but also to support them in the knowledge that we are called to follow Jesus in making the kingdom a reality in our time. Amen.