

A Place to Find Jesus

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A — 29 January, 2023

Reverend Martin Johnson

Micah 6.1-8; Psalm 15; 1 Corinthians 1.18-31; Matthew 5.1-12.

The 2019 series *The Chosen* dramatizes the early ministry of Jesus and his calling of the disciples. In one episode, we see Jesus preparing for the Sermon on the Mount. The episode begins with Jesus gently waking Matthew who is sleeping in the open, clearly in the area in which the sermon is to be preached. Jesus tells him that he has found a way to describe and proclaim his message. He tells Matthew it's a map. Matthew shakes himself out of sleep takes a draught of water from his goat skin and retrieves a small clay tablet. He stands next to Jesus who looks far into the distance as he recites the Beatitudes. Finally, he turns and looks intently at Matthew and says 'Blessed are *you* when people revile *you* and persecute *you* and utter all kinds of evil against *you* falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.' Matthew nods and smiles, finishes writing and then says rather prosaically 'but how is it a map?' To which Jesus responds, 'If someone wants to find me, those are the groups to look for.'

As the year gathers pace, and we look to the future it is a pertinent question to ask, are *we* one of those groups? This is what our Missional Spirituality project seeks to help us discover and appreciate. This is not like KYB (Know your Bible), or EFM (Education for Ministry), it is not like Alpha—as good as those resources are. It's not about what we do, or what we know. It is about the kind of community we are, and the kind of community we want to be . . . one of those groups.

The two readings from the New Testament that we heard this morning (1 Corinthians 1:18-31 and Matthew 5:1-12) give us an opportunity to contemplate what these groups might look like. In his book of meditations, *Silence and Honey Cakes*, Rowan Williams describes 'the daily prayer of believers, the constant celebration of the Eucharist' and then speaks of meeting the same potentially difficult or dull people time after time, because he says, 'they are the soil of growth.' Commenting on this, our own Fr Scott writes in his new book:

Such a perspective is refreshingly free of frustrated idealism; it's not scandalized by Christian ordinariness, even by sin. God is not fazed by us, after all, and doesn't give up on us for our falling short. Yet parishes can be frustrating, occasionally dispiriting, and even embittering. So how might we keep up our courage and maintain our commitment?

Because, he goes on, there are many in our Church who believe that the parish system is un-reformable and should be abandoned or at least bypassed. I am not one of them, neither is Fr Scott, which is why we are embarking on this project, a project which pre-supposes both place and community.

Here is a place, a sacred place in which God and human reality—read poverty, grief, striving for justice, forgiveness, persecution and, yes, even frustration and embitterment—can belong together. Of course we know, don't we, that church is more than a building. Because God and human reality is Jesus. This is the place for one of 'those groups!' It is not ideal, no, it is a place—if we read Paul carefully—where a love abides that is at once vulnerable and without protection. It is a place that makes no bold claim to be right. It is a place in which human competition does not count, a place where the desperate anxiety to please God means nothing; a place where the admission of failure is not the end but the beginning, a place from

which no one is excluded in advance. It can be frustrating and occasionally dispiriting; this is a place where we are called to live the Beatitudes:

To be a people whose happiness does not depend upon our constant striving for material gain.

To be a people who know grief and are the wiser for it.

To be gentle and considerate folk.

To be dissatisfied with the *status quo* . . . even our own.

To be people who know how to forgive.

To be people marked with a certain simplicity.

To be peace makers.

And to put up with the ridicule that comes with this lifestyle. To be a people who continue to gather and commune together and with God. Whatever!

Our Missional Spirituality Project is not ‘planning’ to change anything—that might be the outworking of it, yes, I hope it is, but there are no KPIs, (this might be a little disconcerting to those who have granted us some funds, but we’ll have to deal with that!). There is a map, yes, a journey, one in which we strive to be the ones who are blessed and are therefore a group that others might wish to be a part of, those who are wanting to engage where God meets human reality, in other words, . . . with Jesus.

Every time we leave this place we are reminded, if we care to look up, of the passage from Micah that we heard this morning (6:1-8). I recall preaching on this text in my first parish. The church was in Tallarook and at that time was termite riven and dusty. I was new and keen, I had grand plans, but I was tempted to be dispirited and I quoted from a 1930’s depression poem, which reads in part . . . ‘things are crook in Tallarook.’ I mused out loud: ‘I wonder how they are in Shittim.’ The three members of the congregation didn’t smile, and I wondered . . . what can I do? I should of course have contemplated more deeply the entire passage. Micah too muses, Micah is dispirited . . . what have we got to do? We are perhaps tempted to be the same. But the answer is clear, the answer is clear and is written over our door: what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

This is a Missional text writ large, and it is my hope that we engage with it and find our own faith enlarged, find a spirituality, that we will be encouraged, and we will perhaps appreciate a little more our motto ‘Come and see.’ Come and see Jesus in a group of folk who strive to live the Beatitudes. Amen.