Our ministry of care for each other and for the world is the priority

Rev’d Peter Balabanski

Pentecost 23 C: Isa 65.17-25; Isa 12.1-6; 2 Thess 3.7-12; Lk 21.5-19

Children’s time: straight after this *Stir-up Sunday* collect.

Lord God of all the ages, the One who is, who was, and who is to come: *stir up* within us a longing for your kingdom, keep our hearts steady in times of trial, and grant us patient endurance until the Sun of justice dawns.

We’re just about to hear words from the prophet, Isaiah. He’s speaking to people who’ve had a terrible time – so terrible that you could hear weeping all over their city. (Weeping is the sort of crying that means you can’t do anything but cry. And when it stops, you’re so exhausted, you can’t do anything except sleep).

But Isaiah’s telling the people about a dream God’s given him – a dream that everything will be new and good again; so good there won’t be weeping any more.

God gave them a dream. What happens when *you* dream? Do you wake up and find that your dream has really happened? What do you think happens with God’s dreams? Maybe they won’t happen straight away, but I think you can be sure that when it’s God’s time, they will happen.

Isaiah wanted people to dream God’s dream – to dream what God was dreaming. People who know how it feels to weep and weep have always understood what Isaiah means, and they’ve made songs so that people can dream God’s dreams, and give each

other some hope. Here's one of those songs

Peace / love / joy is flowing like a river, flowing out through you and me; spreading out into the desert; setting all the captives free.

Eg of the tune – https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TB_7KtgxhOs

We might not see God's dream happen straight away, but maybe some people who weep will hear us singing God's dream for them. And that might just help them. But now it's time for us to hear the readings.

Sermon

… *we didn't eat anyone's bread without paying for it; but with toil and labour we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you.* 2nd Thess 3.8

Where I was a child, you didn't have to go to the shops to buy bread; the baker came to our street in a small van. And every time he opened the back door of his van, it smelt beautiful – the smell of freshly baked bread. He'd load a basket and walk from door to door with the basket over his arm. And he didn't knock or ring any doorbells. He'd just get to the door and call out 'Bake!'

Our baker didn't just bring bread; he also brought news from around the neighbourhood. One day, before he came to our house, he must have stopped at a house where some missionaries were guests – perhaps they were back on furlough. I imagine he found out about them when extra bread was unexpectedly needed.

Our baker shared news and he also shared his opinions. So when he told us about the visiting missionaries, I remember him adding, 'Those missionaries come back home and tell us they live on faith; what they really mean is living on other people!'

It looks as if the Thessalonian Christians may have had a few unsympathetic social commentators like our old baker watching them. In the first letter to the Thessalonians, (5.10-12) we read that some of their recognised hallmarks as a community were the care they showed – not just to each other, but to Christians throughout their region – and that they themselves were dependent on no-one.

So had something changed since that first letter was written, that today we heard them being warned to be tough on people we Australians call bludgers?

We don't have much access to the specific circumstances this letter addressed, but it's not too far-fetched to think that as the Christian community's reputation for charity and care spread, some greedy people might have come out of the woodwork who were only too pleased to live off their kindness. Having charlatans and leeches twisting Christian charity into a personal cash-cow and pretending to help the poor is a very bad witness. It's the sort of thing that has many people these days saying that the church is full of hypocrites.

So are we in a no-win situation? Does being kind and welcoming – even risking being taken for a ride – mean that our care is seen as stupidity? Or on the other hand, does being tough and discerning mean we'll be seen as uncaring? Which way do we turn?

The answer in this passage and the others we've read today is that 'discipleship is not about waiting passively for God to act, but rather anticipating God's action through our own actions of compassion and mercy.' Even in the gospel, with its descriptions of the end-times, the heart of its teaching is about perseverance in doing what Jesus does; 'By your endurance you will gain your souls.' (Lk 21.19)

The main reason for the two letters to the Thessalonians was to teach about readiness for the end-times. The part we read

today asks the question, ‘Are the people of this church going to spend the last days witnessing to the transforming power of Jesus’ love, or are we going to be gullible, indulgent laughing stocks?’

The message is clear: no matter what the local baker may say about us, no matter what portents and calamities may threaten us, our ministry of care for each other and for the world is the priority – living out of the Holy Spirit’s dwelling within and amongst us.

We are not to be distracted from this – we are not to be discouraged. Isaiah challenges us to live constantly in a way that proclaims the end of weeping; to live guided by the most important thing; the promised joy and blessing of the prophecy. This is something which can transform a community. People may suggest that we’re living in a fools’ paradise when we live that way. They may see works of kindness among us and run us down as dreamers, naïve do-gooders, or hypocrites putting on a front. But what sort of world are they choosing for themselves then?

What does God want from us really? Quite simply, trust God; love one another; turn the world upside down.

This is the theological context for the pastoral care that I see flourishing in this parish. It is something that involves all of us. It is something that simply happens, and for no tangible reward, because the reward has been given to each of us already; God’s grace. While we were still a long way from God, Jesus came and suffered the consequence of that alienation in order to destroy its power to imprison us and anyone else. We didn’t ask for it; it was given before we were even born.

We love *because*—not *so that*. We believe that God already loves us. We don’t have to set about earning God’s love. So our love – our care – is a response; an act of gratitude. It’s not a

work seeking a reward; we love *because.* We also believe that God already loves our neighbour. So there's no sense in waiting for our neighbour to earn our care before we offer it. Who are we to withhold what God has already given? We're often God's means of showing that care. Someone's kindness may well have been how we first experienced God's care ourselves.

This is what it means to live God's dream for us, and by living it, to discover that it is real. God is creator, and anything God dreams or imagines is instantly real. If we don't recognise that, it's us who are living the illusion. Living God's vision for us is to discover reality. Living God's vision is to reveal that reality to our neighbour, and so to enable that neighbour to live in the new creation as well.

Next week, Christ the King Sunday, the focus is the Kingdom. Back in Luke 17.[20-21] we read one of Jesus' teachings about the Kingdom *Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among / within you."*

Our task as Christ's body is to reveal that Kingdom in our physical bodies by living as citizens of that Kingdom. That task is the thank-offering we call our lives. Amen.