

Homily for people and parishes...

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday, 11th August 2024, Pentecost 12

Readings: 2 Samuel 18:5-9, 14, 31-33 **Psalm 130**

Ephesians 4:25 – 5:2

John 6:35, 41-51

I recently reviewed a survey that helps congregations think about how to welcome people when they come to church. It is tempting to think that a good handshake and a smile is all that's needed, but the survey helpfully identifies additional things to be mindful of even before we enter a church building! *'Do you have a website or Facebook page, and does the information on these explain clearly who you are, what you believe, and what time you're open?'* – is the first question. *'Are the Website and Facebook photos of church buildings, or are they of people that are clearly happy being together?'* is the second question!

The survey goes on to ask if it's easy to park a car near the church? Is there disability access? and... are the toilets clearly signed?! Are there welcome cards for new people, and is there a system that ensures they will be contacted after their visit? Are there people at the door who will welcome parishioners, and introduce visitors to someone who will be friendly?

These are all helpful questions, but the survey does not talk about the significance of community culture, which is interesting. I think a church could have the most engaging person at the door and an award-winning website, but if the gathered community does not love each other, and are not interested in visitors... it is unlikely that a new person will want to come back.

Today's reading from Ephesians speaks strongly about church culture, and I wonder what behaviours were being addressed. Even though the words were written to a church community two thousand years ago, I think they can still speak uncomfortable truth to us. In that time people could relate well or relate poorly – which is surely true to our lived experience of church community today.

Clearly, there were some behaviours and attitudes which were creating division, and these were addressed directly: *'...put away falsehood and speak the truth!..'* the writer said. *'...don't let the sun go down on your anger!'* *'Let no evil talk come out of your mouths...'* and *'...put away bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander... and all malice...'* Which in summary could read: Don't lie! Don't gossip! Don't harden your heart! and, don't be forever angry!

The author of Ephesians does not leave the community wondering about the behaviours they should practice as he exhorted them to: *'...speak the truth...'* *'...share with the needy...'*

'...speak words of grace...' *'...and be kind to one another, tender hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven...'* *'be imitators of God..'* *'...and live in love...'* Surely there is wisdom for us in this, because we each play a part in creating, maintaining, and in transforming community culture.

No matter how small our Bible study group, or morning prayer congregation; and no matter how large our Sunday gathering... **is there evidence of a culture that is shaped and enabled by Christian faith? Do we speak the truth, and share with the needy? Do we forgive each other? Do we practice kindness... & live together in love?**

We know the wisdom of these things, but we're human beings with personalities that bump into each other, so inevitably there will be conflict along the way. Conflict is normal in human relationships, so how we respond to it is important. Do we pretend it's not happening, and allow things to fester? Do we run away, and hope that in time things will cool down? Are we frightened that in naming bad behaviour there will be rejection or ridicule?

Dealing with, and managing, conflict is tough... but it is a necessary part of community life.

The Roman Catholic Parish in Springfield has a large and growing congregation and the ministry team who serve there have an annual practice that I think is worth considering. At the beginning of each year they collectively identify behaviours that are healthy and behaviours that are toxic. Having agreed to these they then give permission for toxic behaviours to be called out if they are observed or perceived during the the year so that the culture of the Parish, created by the leaders, is as healthy as it can be.

Teachers will often do something similar with their classes at the beginning of each year... so, maybe Parish Councils could do the same after being elected at the Annual General Meeting. The guide-book called 'Being Together', produced by the National Anglican Church is a great resource to help name positive behaviours: <https://www.anglicanchurchsq.org.au/being-together> but these are guidelines rather than a policy. This means that we do not have agreed consequences when clergy or congregation members inflict non-criminal harm upon another.

Conflict in community life is challenging and there are tensions within scriptural wisdom as to how best to respond for didn't Jesus suggest that we are to, 'Love our enemies, and pray for those who persecute us...' (Matthew 5:44); and didn't he say, 'Turn the other cheek!' (Matthew 5:38-40) after being struck. Certainly, he did – but he is also remembered saying that he came so we could have 'life in all its fullness...' (Jn 10:10) and that does not mean being diminished and harmed.

Again, in Matthew's Gospel Jesus is remembered offering one way to manage conflict which goes like this: 'If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when then two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But, if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the member refuses to listen to them...' treat them like they don't belong to the church! (Matthew 18:15-17)

I don't know how practical this is in a world that shares half truths and untruths on social media and email, and in a society where privacy legislation is rightly taken seriously.

There is wisdom in the Ephesians reading today as surely as there is wisdom in the guidelines expressed in the 'Being Together' document published by the National Church. However there also needs to be wisdom as to how their insights can be used to address harmful behaviours, within local congregations and within the life of the Church.

A good starting point is for each of us to consider our own behaviours and see if the way we interact with others, and speak about others, is life-giving to a community or not. And if there is need for change to ask God's Spirit for help in this. Weighty things worth taking into prayer. Would you please join me in prayer now:

Gracious God, we give thanks for the many ways you nourish and nurture us in life and in faith. We give thanks for the opportunity to think about the impact our behaviour has on the lives of others, and ask for insight about this. We also ask you to give church leaders wisdom in how best to address harmful behaviours in the life of the Church. We pray in the name of the one who shows us the way, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen