

First Sunday after Epiphany

Sermon Text: Isaiah 43:1-7

Theme: “*Built on a rock, the church doth stand*”

Grace, peace and mercy to you from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

It would be impossible not to acknowledge that this is to be my last sermon I will preach here in Cairns, certainly as your parish pastor. But having made this acknowledgement, it is equally clear that this congregation and this parish is founded on much more than any individual and definitely more than the pastor. To help us focus rightly on Christ alone, we have today’s Bible readings, especially the Old Testament reading from Isaiah and the Gospel reading from Luke. “John (the Baptist) answered them all, saying, “I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.” (Lk 3:16)

Heavenly Father, sanctify us in the truth, your Word is truth. Amen.

He who is mightier than I is coming

John the Baptist preached a powerful yet simple message to the people of Jerusalem. “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” (Lk 3:4-6) Whilst not a popular message, John’s unyielding proclamation had the desired effect of turning people back to God. John didn’t take his message to the people. He didn’t seek the popular places where people gathered to reach them in the most effective or relevant way. He stood in the wilderness, away from the city where people were surrounded by the things they had constructed – he stood in the wilderness and he faithfully preached the message that God had given him – “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” And because John didn’t mix up the message, people came to him. The apostle John records that the Jews sent priests and Levites to question him until eventually Mark records that “all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins” (Mk 1:5).

As people who want to do good things, we can easily become muddled up and we start to think we are the ones who have to dress up God’s message so people will find it attractive and want to hear it more than the message the rest of the world peddles for us. It doesn’t take much for the message to become confused and it is no longer God’s message of repentance and belief in Christ. Worse still if the popular message gains a following of excited people as the leaders can become puffed up with their importance and with their success.

This could have happened to John the Baptist. With so many people coming to hear once more God’s message of repentance and belief, some began to ask whether John was the longed for Messiah. Was John God’s anointed leader of his people, the one who would lead them out from under the Roman rule? Rather than bask in the glorious adulation of the growing number of his disciples, John answers emphatically, “...he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.” In John’s gospel he says, “He (Jesus) must increase, but I must decrease.” (Jn 3:30). What wonderful and genuine humility. It was *never* about John and what a great job he did in drawing people towards the coming Messiah. Instead it was *always* about Jesus who would win salvation for all people, and this is where the power for John’s preaching came.

God calls us by name

Our Old Testament reading comes from Isaiah and here the prophet lays the foundation for the messiah’s work. God, speaking through Isaiah says to Israel, “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine” (Is 43:1). Here God’s Word tells us that he knows each one of us individually, so much so that he knows you by name and he claims you as his own, “You are mine”. How does it feel to be claimed by someone else? You may not like it. It may not sit comfortably upon your shoulders that you belong to someone else. It means your life is not your own, you are not the master of your own destiny.

But it does mean that God takes responsibility for you. God loves you and he cares for you. God cares enough that when you pass through the waters and when you walk through the fire you shall not be harmed. So when you are struggling with the challenges and trials of life, no matter how unfair or how threatening they may seem, God’s promise is to be with you because you belong to him. And if you are still uncomfortable with this image of belonging to someone else, remember that God does not own you like a possession but rather he

has adopted you as his own child. God was with you when you passed through the waters of baptism and he said to you on that day, this is my son, this is my daughter, with you I am well pleased for you are bound to my Son, Jesus Christ, and he has covered your faults, your sins with his righteousness.

There is a wonderful passage in Exodus 3 when God called Moses to lead his people out of Egyptian slavery. God charged Moses with the responsibility of going up to Pharaoh and telling him to let the Israelites go. Surely this was an impossible task for Moses. Just when Moses was quaking with the thought of attempting the impossible, God reveals the truth, “I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey” (Ex3:8). As it was true for the Moses and the ancient Israelites, isn’t it still true for us today. No matter who the individuals are in any congregation, it is God who is the active one in the faith life of individuals and it is God who is the active one in the faith life of the congregation. He is the one who sees the people who are trapped in addiction, trapped in poverty, trapped in a cycle of violence, trapped in the restrictions of poor health, and it is God who will lead your friends and families out of this slavery, maybe through using you and your witness to him.

Built on a Rock

As I prepare to leave Cairns I have allowed myself an indulgence, the choosing of the hymns for today’s service, and none is more indulgent than choosing my favourite hymn for after the sermon. Hymn 188 is “Built on a rock, the Church doth stand”. I like the music but most of all I like the message and I feel it is particularly worthy given today’s readings and the fact that I as your pastor will be leaving you today. You see sometimes today our churches become too focussed on personalities and indeed I think this is true in many parts of our society today. It seems the personality is more important than the substance of what that person stands for. Well this hymn preaches the truth that long after this church building has been left, or fallen down, or sold off, *The Church – that is God’s Church*, will remain strong and enduring.

It is not the freshly painted bricks, nor the beautifully hand stitched paraments, nor the spectacular timber frames, not even a fancy new sound system that will bring people into a relationship with God. Rather it is you who are God’s house of living stones who will stand strong for others to cling to. God promises to fill your hearts and from your hearts will overflow the love and light of Christ into those God puts before you. It is something you can’t help and it is something that you can’t stop. Just as John the Baptist didn’t set out to do anything spectacular, God used him in a spectacular way. But the miracle of the Christian faith is that God had already used countless people to bring his message to the Jews for thousands of years. We know this because in spite of so many of God’s people turning away from him, there were still many faithful people who welcomed Jesus as the Messiah, the promised one of God.

How will history record this generation? Will it be one of many people turning away from God and his message of repentance and belief or will it be one of people remembering and putting their trust in God?

Dear Friends, as I leave Cairns there are many conflicting emotions coursing through my veins. But much more important to me and to you is God’s Word in which he promises to be the one who will lead us no matter what circumstances we find ourselves in, nor the location in which we live or work. It is why we pray together as brothers and sisters in Christ the words of hymn 188 v5:

*Through all the passing years, O Lord,
Grant that, when church bells are ringing,
Many may come to hear God’s Word
Where He this promise is bringing:
I know My own, My own know Me;
Ye, not the world, My face shall see;
My peace I leave with you, Amen.*