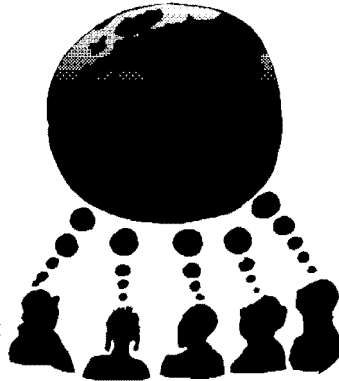


"SAVING THE CHURCH OR SAVING THE WORLD" by Rev Iain Gow
22nd November 2009 – St George's Anglican Church

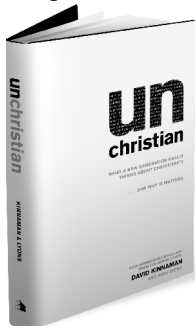


Reading: O/T: Isaiah 6:8
N/T: Exodus 3:1-5
Gospel: John 15:12-17 & 26-27

Sentence for the Day: Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me"

I was driving the other day in Glenfield and I must have done something wrong, because a young man wound down his car window and sticking his head out cursed me with every swear word I knew (and more). I did not know what I had done if anything, so at the next lights, when we pulled up together, I wound my window down, and said, "I am so sorry for whatever it is I did to offend you." Anyway... my apology was met with even further hatred. I then said, "Look, I am an Anglican priest and just want to say sorry." Oh he said, "that figures....another bl... Christian...go back to your Bishop Tamaki!"

If you are new here today, we have been looking at a book called:



"UnChristian"

to help us understand how people outside the church, looking in, see those who are followers of Christ. I am not sure how well I did with my driver friend, but there you are! The majority of you who have read the book said you have found it an helpful book whilst others of you found it harder going. Let me say it s not the Bible to me, but I chose it because I thought it might help us reflect further on to build better bridges with those outside the church, because one perception from those outside, is that Christians are more interested in Saving the Church (creating an inwardly looking club for ourselves), than in Saving the World (being involved to make the world a better place).

So let me start off, with a story that comes from a book written by Chuck Carlson and which I read hundred's of years ago! It is about someone whose faith infused them to make a difference for others. His name was Boris Kornfeld. He was a Russian Jew, a doctor. He like most other Jews had supported the revolution under Lenin. He had done this because atheistic Russia promised something much better for the Jews than had Christian Czarist Russia, where the Jews had been persecuted and killed in huge numbers.



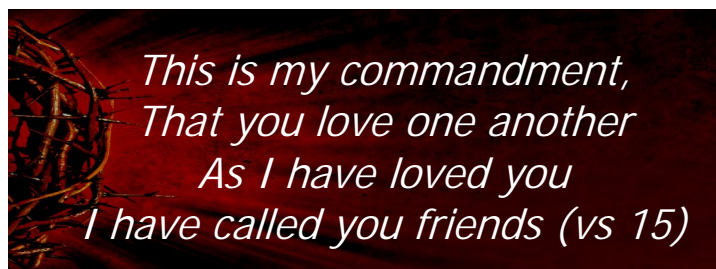
One day though, he was visited by the secret police. We don't know why; it was probably a harmless point he had made whilst having some drinks with some friends. But for that he was sentenced to Siberia by Stalin to one of the

concentration camps, where the conditions were terrible and people died from starvation, the freezing cold, the inhumane treatment given out by the guards. And it was here that Kornfeld was asked to be a doctor, to heal people when the system wanted people dead.

He grew bitter, but one day he met a man, who felt as a follower of Christ, he could make the world a better place, even in this hell-hole. The prisoners thought he was mad, but Kornfeld found he was well-educated and able to explain the Christian faith in a way that was relevant to Kornfelds' questions. This man's message of Christ offered hope; he was authentic and did not push Kornfeld before he was ready, so Kornfeld spent more time with him as the man continued to live and explain who Jesus was.

One day Kornfeld was operating on a prison guard who had been knifed. He was a hated man who had killed many prisoners. Kornfeld was ordered to save him, but as the hatred welled up in his heart, he thought, if I tie these surtures in a certain way, then the surtures will come undone and the guard will die. As he started to do this, he heard in his mind, the words of the Lords' prayer come to him. He cried out to Christ to help him and from that moment, something changed in him and he felt God's love flow into his heart and mind.

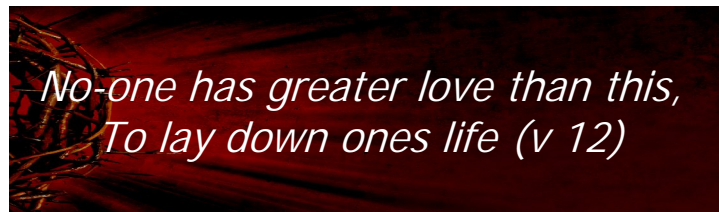
Kornfeld did not understand everything that had happened to him straight away, but he understood that God was no longer some vague force out there but through the person of Jesus, someone who wished to be his saviour/friend/companion.



Jesus used these words in its original context to his disciples 2000 years ago. He invited them to become part of his vision to make the world a better place. Today, Jesus does the same; he invites you and I today to join in his vision, to bring justice where there are unjust systems in the place we work; to help bring solace to those who are sad; to bring as his hands, voice, heart love to those whose lives are struggling. When we hear his words "come follow me", do we reject

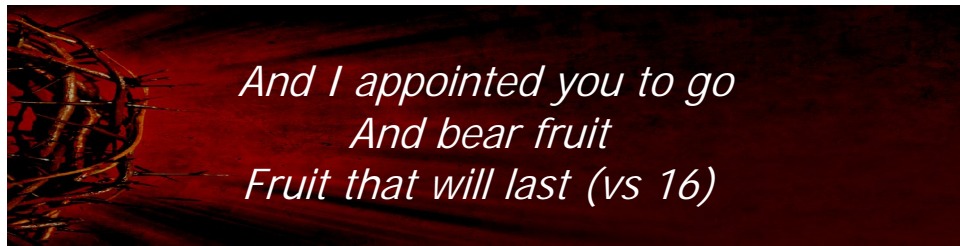
them or do we say 'yes' as Kornfeld did, and who because of that personal realization of God's love for him, found his life changed. In the next couple of months, he found a new freedom to live, paradoxical when you think he was still in prison. He decided that he had to share what Christ had done for him, to pass on through word and deed what God's love meant and because of that he became a marked man in the prison camp. There was no place for weakness in a prison camp and following Christ was assumed to be weak!

One day Kornfeld was operating on a young prisoner, when he could no longer contain himself. He told the young man all that Christ meant to him. That night while Kornfeld slept, exhausted from his work, trying to save lives when the system was trying to kill them, a prison orderly crept up behind him and bashed his head in with a club because he stood as a Christian in the camp. He died.

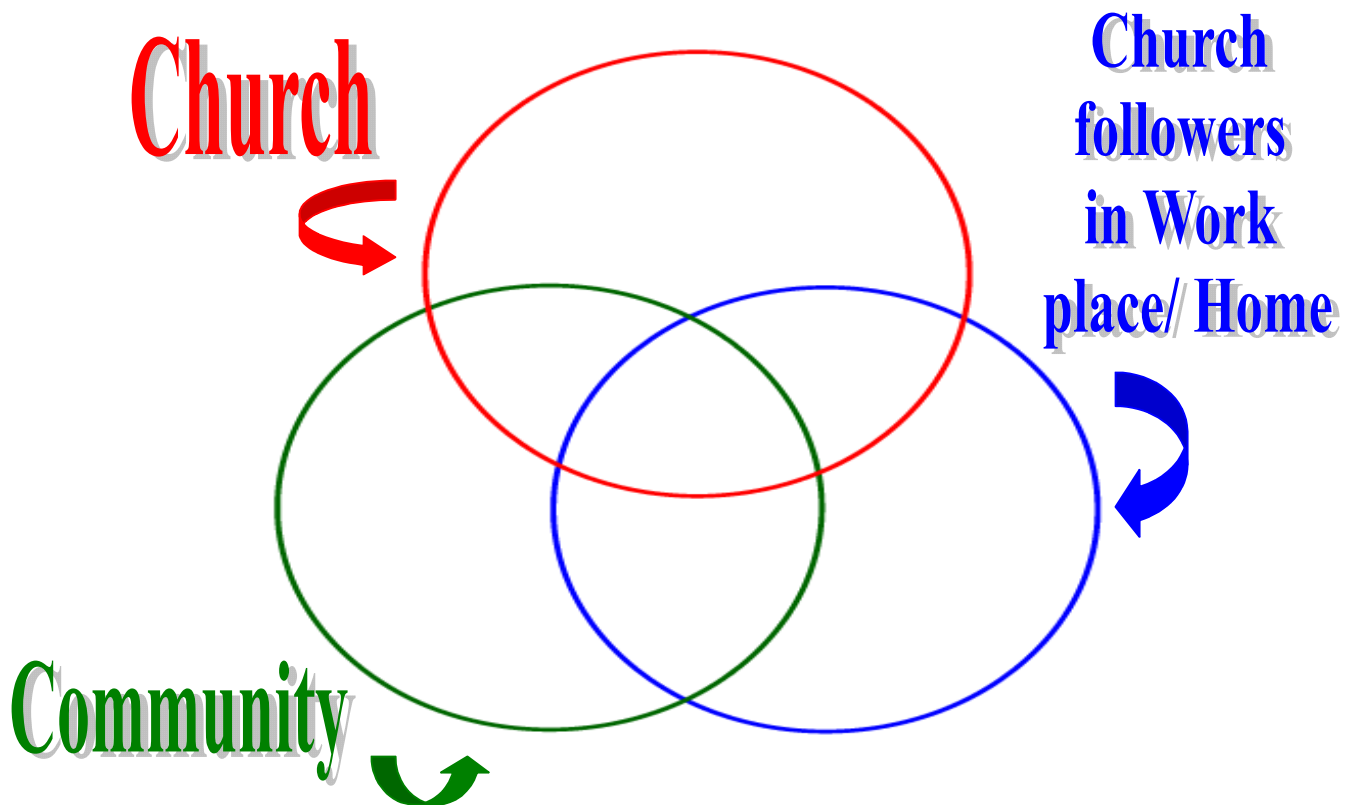


Just as Christ's testimony on the Cross did not die, Kornfeld's testimony did not die; the man who woke up the next day from his anesthetic, remembered Kornfeld's words and became a follower of Christ himself. The prisoner's name was Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who wrote Cancer Ward, The Gulag Archipelago and who through these books was able to bring to the worlds attention, all the evil that was in Russia under Stalin. Many historians today will say that Solzhenitsyn's testimony had a huge impact on the breaking up of the Soviet Union, perhaps as much as Gorbachev's 'glasnost' or 'perestokia'.

God was able through Kornfeld to bear fruit.



So what will be our fruit as a church as together as a church, over this next year, we reflect on what new season God may be calling us into that is relevant to the needs of the 21st century?



I see three possible circles as in a Venn Diagram to help us in our thinking together on where to focus.

The first is what we do “as church” on Sundays and during the week. I do not see vast changes needed for the Sunday services, tweaking how we may be more consistent in terms of the quality and creativity of our services, ensuring our services are welcoming to all including seekers, offering biblically based sermons that are life-applicable, making sure there is a greater focus on prayer as a church, which Stan will be launching in January next year.

Regarding the second circle, I know under Bob the church's vision-statement was: "Empowering people to be Christ's followers in the World." I don't want to lose that; in fact I wish to invest further resources into that area of helping people know how to live out their life as followers of Christ in their work place, at home, in their play time. So watch that space as I am having some very interesting discussions with Andrew and others!

The third circle for discussion is: how do we respond to our neighboring Auckland community? For most people, the step into church is just too big a step. We thus need to build bridges/pathways. A current blessing to the community is Judy's work in the elderly people's homes as our Chaplain. An obvious other area to reflect on is since we have so many schools around us, why don't we embed a couple of community youth chaplain to schools. I have spoken to some of the schools already and they are very interested in making links with St George's. A further crazy dream, why don't we consider raising a mere \$2 million (if you say that quickly enough doesn't sound much) changing the vicarage into a "Centre for Restoration and Reconciliation", so that those who find their lives fractured/broken, can come and in a Christian context find restoration and reconciliation for their marriages, their families, their teenagers. Some may never wish to explore further the journey with Christ, but we will have blessed them in God's name and sown a seed of his love. But others may well be interested and choose to cross that bridge to explore more.

But a note of caution as we start dreaming dreams. Last week's theme was God Centered – People Focused. Christ said to his disciples 2000 years ago in that passage today, "Abide in me."

“Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me” (God centered)
John 15:12-27

He says it to us today for He knew how important this was for his own ministry, to abide in God the Father, for out of that source of love, belonging and security, he worked out his calling. We will find our own calling as a Church for the next five years out of that place of intimacy, by ensuring Christ is our centre, by coming back to the heartbeat of our faith through worship, prayer, studying the Bible. Only then, we will we get our vision right to be relevant to the World around us in Auckland, because we will see with the eyes of Christ, an attitude towards others that is grace-driven, compassionate and involved. We will see others how God sees them, as ‘My children’, who have just not yet recognized me ‘As Father’, the author of all goodness, beauty and truth.

So we come to the end of our first series together. If you are new here today, let me share with you that I have only been here for two months. I see a church that has a wonderful past; a real sense of community/family here and from the very positive emails received from you, a church that is excited to dream new dreams that build on all the good of the past and present. Come join us, because at the beginning of this sermon, I asked a question that is often asked by others outside the church. What you guys do who are followers of Christ, is it about just “Saving the church (about yourselves) or the Saving the World (getting involved in God’s creation)?” My answer is it’s about both. We can’t do the latter, without first coming back to Christ and making sure the church is God focused. In the passage from Isaiah, the writer asks on behalf of God, “Who shall I send to make a difference in the world? We answer, “Send us Lord, send us!” But first enable us to glimpse your Face. Amen!