

## SERMON – THE NON-ANXIOUS PRESENCE OF CHRIST

I've been reminded this week that God definitely has a sense of humour. Just as I decided to speak about cultivating the wisdom of the non-anxious presence of Christ in testing times; I then experienced two of the most challenging weeks I've had in a fair while.

I said a few weeks back that Aotearoa N Z was entering uncharted waters. I think it would be a fair observation to say that these waters are getting a little choppy. We are going through a paradigm shift of how we do society, and this will inevitably impact how we do church. Now quite understandably feelings are running a little high. (in case you hadn't noticed). But given the complex and fraught territory we've now entered... it would be very surprising if feelings weren't running high.

And given the many personal conversations that I've had these past few weeks, and what I witness happening all around me, I think I would sum up the spiritual temperature as **anxious, agitated** and sometimes a little **angry**.

As the family Jones, we have had our own anxiety provoking situations to deal with these past few weeks and I know you'll find this very difficult to believe, but I too, have had times of feeling a tad agitated and angry. But I do think it's very important for all of us to recognise, that when we are swimming in a great ocean of uncertainty, struggling at times to catch breath, all of these feelings are very human and very understandable.

BUT as I've tried to process my own feelings, and tried to recognise some of the deeper undercurrents that I can see are dragging me into responses that are not helpful, either others or myself... I keep coming back to a fundamental question of our faith. And it's a question that I believe, that will become more and more important, as the weeks go by, **for such a time as this**.

**What difference does our faith make, to how we respond differently?**

**It's a key question. How does our faith make a difference to how we respond differently, to times of testing and trial?**

How we try to answer this, individually, and as a church, is going to be immensely important in the coming weeks and months. What I don't mean by this, is that because we have a faith everything will be alright and there's never a troubled night in these challenging times. What I do mean, is that our faith gives us a deeper calling on our lives to respond differently to times of trial and testing. **As we see in today's scripture passage** St Paul tells us ... **"do not be anxious about anything"**. Jesus tells us... **"do not be troubled and do not be afraid."**

Now does this mean that Jesus and Paul expect us to be superhumanly calm in all situations? Well, we know it can't mean this, because Jesus Himself was anxious and very agitated in Gethsemane. You don't 'sweat like drops of blood' as Jesus did, unless your soul is deeply troubled. We also know that Paul had a thorn of agitation in his flesh that he wrestled with constantly.

But look deeper at the wisdom that both Jesus and Paul give us, and we see that they offer a spiritual tool for these times. Yes, Paul tells us ... **Do not be anxious about anything, but then he says "in every situation, by prayer and petition, present your request to God with a grateful heart**. What Paul offers us, is a spiritual tool for the spirit of anxiety. Take every situation to God in prayer to seek God's deeper wisdom. If we do this, says Paul, we **will** know the peace of God, that so often eludes our understanding. And this will *help* guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

**Think about ~~that~~ this wisdom and ask, what did Jesus do in Gethsemane in His time of anxiety?**

Well He prayed to His Father God **3 TIMES**. And from this time of prayer Jesus emerged with the spirit of surrender and peace. From this HE became the non-anxious presence of Christ to all around him, even as he walked to the Cross.

**The writer of Proverbs captures all of this in 2 verses. Trust in the LORD with all your heart - Do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways, acknowledge God, and seek God's will. And God will show you which path to take.**

Same core wisdom. Same core truth At all times in every situation, do not lean on your own understanding. Seek God's deeper wisdom and then TRUST in this wisdom with all you heart. For me this is key stuff for HOW our faith can make a difference to how we respond differently, in times of testing, that we are inevitably going to face.

Now again, none of this is easy. These words can be both very comforting but at the same time deeply challenging. Who of us can claim that at all-times and in every situation, we've always practised this wisdom? I can think of many a time when I've 'leaned' a little too much on my own understanding, only to realise that this isn't the wisest thing to do. Because in times of strain and stress, an over reliance on my own wisdom isn't the soundest of structures and its likely to give way causing me to lose balance.

BUT, if you, and I, and we as a Church community, are to cultivate the non-anxious presence of Christ in our lives for such a time as this, we do need to shape and form ourselves from the deep wisdom we are gifted in today's 3 scripture passages. Do not lean on our understanding, instead lean into the deeper wisdom of God, at all times, in every situation.

From a personal perspective, I've tried to make this wisdom a fundamental part of my daily spiritual practice. Be it sitting down alone in a room, or whether I'm out for a walk, or even riding my bike around Cornwall Park ... I've tried to take every situation and feeling to God in prayer.

As you will all know, when we do seek God's wisdom in prayer, the Spirit has a way of leading and guiding us to an insight we need for that moment in time. One of the great gifts for me this week, was to be led to these words by St Ignatius, one of the spiritual giants in the great cloud of witnesses of our Christian faith.

As you hear these words of wisdom, it's worth noting that they were given at time when there was no safety net of modern medicines, and the world could be a very risky place indeed. **So ponder these words for our times... "We should not fix our thoughts on health or sickness, wealth or poverty, success or failure, a long life or a short one.** (And these are the key words for me ... **For EVERYTHING has the potential of calling forth in us... a deeper response to our life in God. Our only desire and our one choice should be this. I want and I choose what leads to Gods deepening life IN me.**

**Could there be a more important, pertinent, profound wisdom for such a time as this?** That in every situation in life that we are currently facing or may face... there is *always* the *potential*... to call forth within us, a deeper response to our life IN God. But we do have a choice.

So what's the deeper response in our lives that we need to call forth... so that our faith makes a difference to how we respond differently? Well I put this question to God for my own life and God in His wisdom gave m a picture. And it was this!



Healthy fruit that's flourishing and fruit that's blighted. **What did this picture mean for me?**

It was a reminder of how important it will be, to guard our hearts and minds in Christ as we negotiate the coming weeks and months. When blight gets a grip on any plant, it diminishes its capacity to flourish and grow. And so it is with the Spiritual realm. When the spiritual blights of intolerance, anger, blame, division and bitterness take root in our hearts, then we all lose our capacity to flourish and grow. And at the root of all spiritual blight of course is the spirit of fear.

So back to that question...

**What's the deeper response in our lives that we need to call forth, so that our faith will make a difference to how we respond differently?**

**Well, there are 2 foundational truths of our faith that we know for certain deepens our faith in God.**

- Firstly, we make Christ the centre of all we think, of all we say, and of all we do.
- Secondly, we are called to cultivate in our hearts and lives, the life-giving, life-breathing qualities of the Holy Spirit. The qualities and attributes that we know so well and yet forget so quickly. And here is the very deep truth of our faith response. Whenever the holy qualities and the fruit of Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control, are evident in our thoughts, our words and our deeds... then we can be certain, that our faith will make a difference to how we respond differently. And we must never make the mistake these are just 'nice qualities'. They are the **defining qualities** of what it means to be Christian, because they are the **defining qualities** of the Holy Spirit.

One of the huge gifts of my role is that I get the privilege of hearing the very human stories involved in this current situation. And I've been challenged and deeply moved by many of these stories. I guess one of the things that's really struck me, is that many are struggling with the anxiety of possible breakdowns in relationships among families and friends because of the contentious nature of so many of the issues before us. But the difficult truth for all of us to face, is there are no easy answers to these differences. There is only the same core question. **How will our Christian faith make a difference to how we walk together in our differences?**

As we move forward over these coming weeks and months, how we respond to each other will be incredibly important. My prayer for all of us here at St George's, is that at all times in every situation, we will not lean on our own understanding. At all times in every situation, we will seek the deeper wisdom of God in prayer. At all times in every situation, we remember the great promise of Jesus. That the Holy Spirit is our Advocate. The spirit is always with us and is always for us. And in this knowledge, we can know the deep peace and the non-anxious presence of Christ for our lives. We can know that all is well with our soul.