

Pentecost 11 – 31st July 16

Readings: Hosea 11: 1-11; Psalm 107: 1-9, 43; Colossians 3: 1-11; Luke 12: 13-21

Last Thursday week I attended a breakfast for Clergy of Ipswich which was hosted by the Mayor and Council. It's an annual event arranged through the Ipswich Ministers' Fellowship. The guest speaker was Paul White, CEO of the Broncos and he spoke movingly of his journey with cancer and quite openly about his faith which guides him. It put me in mind of another breakfast I'd attended on Bribie Island where the guest speaker was Petero Civinoceva of Broncos and State of Origin fame who now works, or did then as a NRL ambassador, particularly with at risk children. What Petero had to say was excellent, so much so that I remember someone saying to me he was better there than he ever was on the field. Not ever having seen him on the field, I couldn't really comment – but he was good. Good humoured, open, frank, humble, inclusive (even of Blues supporters) and it's obvious he had a passion for what he was doing – helping equip kids to live good lives. He was an example of the best that can come from sport, but I do have some harder things about sport to say later. For me, there was only one question where I think he didn't answer as easily and as confidently as he did all the others, and the question was a very good one – “What are the values that have guided you in your life?” He didn't seem to be able to enumerate them, but instead spoke movingly, about the effect on his life earlier on of two people – his mother, and his coach, and now his family to whom he is obviously devoted. So you needed to listen fairly closely to discern what might be behind what he was saying – he didn't really get to the point of saying “The values important to me are x, y and z”. For me, I thought he could have said things like faithfulness, commitment, self-sacrifice, perseverance, team-work, integrity, humility, inclusiveness – they came through, but not directly. I say this not to criticize, but to observe that in this he's not really different from many I come across. I would often ask couples who come to enquire about marriage what values were important to them, and there was often a sort of shared blank look. One couple said to me that no-one had ever asked them that before.

Two of our readings this morning, the epistle and the gospel are, at their heart about values and lead us to reflect on the values that are important to us. If you were asked to write down the values that are important to you, could you do it? There seems to be a view these days that values just sort of pop up. Our values come, in fact, from a deeply held system of belief, and if people don't have that, their values will be ephemeral and shifting. What is the deepest level of belief for us. ?

Colossians 3 describes Christ as our deepest reality. “When Christ who is your life...” says. Christ who is your life. Resonating with Christ, our lives will be oriented to the things that are above. Here “above” does not refer to otherworldliness and denying the things of the world, but to alignment of our vision with God's vision of Shalom – harmony, peace and wholeness for the whole created order. The author of Colossians challenges us to turn from earthly-mindedness to divine mindedness. While the author affirms the embodiment of God in earthly life, he points out the spiritual shortcomings of earthly-mindedness: objectification of others, alienation, greed, destructiveness, particularly destructive speech – malice, slander, abusive language, to which one could also add gossip. Earthly-mindedness seeks to exalt the individual, individual human experience, and success. It puts me and what I want first apart from consideration of God's vision and the health of our neighbours and the created order. And what is the Colossians value system? For some reason the lectionary compilers have stopped at verse 11 and not gone on to verse 12. “As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved,

clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience.”¹ What a great list of values? And it goes on “Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other, just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, bind yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.”² Forgiveness, love – more to add to the list. What a great compilation of values by which to live a life – and they’re available to us if we seek to align our lives with Christ’s life.

The gospel reading goes to the heart of what awaits those who choose to place themselves at the centre of their worlds. The episode is prompted by a question from someone who wants Jesus to intervene in a family dispute so that the questioner can get what he wants. Jesus makes it clear he will have nothing to do with such partisanship and instead tells a parable about a wealthy landowner who gains the world but is in danger of losing his soul. He builds bigger and better barns to store his goods, but barns don’t last forever. He is, in the words of the hymn we’ll sing at the end of this service, “rich in things and poor in soul”. I’ve read of a popular bumper sticker in the Washington DC area in the USA which reads: “Whoever dies with the most toys wins.” Well, it’s not like that, is it? There is no way to enjoy our toys in the grave. The wealthy and vulnerable alike are mortal and no amount of wealth can protect us from unforeseen accidents, catastrophic or incurable illness, economic downturn, family break-down. It’s not only individuals who can be rich in things and poor in soul. The same can happen to nations – and we’re in grave danger of this in Australia. We have great riches, not only in natural resources, but in an amazingly diverse and creative and talented population, but we have lost our soul. I see many manifestations of that – the short sighted rush to exploit resources for short term gain at the expense of local populations or the environment, the way most sporting codes at the highest levels have had millions of dollars thrown at them for what? The promotion of celebrity, a win at any cost mentality and anything is OK as long as you’re not caught: the shameful treatment in many instances of anyone who is perceived to be different, the most recent example being the evidence of shameful treatment of young people in detention in the Northern Territory. Add to the list the closing of many hearts to those who try to make a new life here, and the meanness of spirit which says that charity begins at home.

We can choose to focus our lives on realities that fade away and cannot support us in times of crisis or we can choose to centre our lives around God’s way of life. Our ultimate concern can make or break us: if we focus primarily on worldly success in its many forms, we will be left bereft when aging, illness, failure, and alienation disable or disillusion us. In seeing God as our ultimate concern, our lives focus on God’s vision for us and our communities. We see our well-being intimately related to the well-being of others. The rich man is utterly devastated when his fortune slips, like sand, through his fingertips. But, even the wealthiest have an opportunity for creative transformation. They can place God’s visions ahead of greed, power, and comfort. They can become persons of spirit rather than consumers and materialists, and there are plenty of examples of those who have done just that and embraced philanthropy as a way of life.

Today’s scriptures invite us to connect our spiritual life with our values and life-style. How does our vision of God shape our values? Conversely how much do our personal priorities shape our spiritual

¹ Colossians 3: 12

² Colossians 3: 13-14

commitments. Do we focus solely on personal interest and comfort, or do we look toward the divine perspective, imperfectly, yet faithfully looking beyond self-interest to Christ-likeness.