

Called and loved

Readings: Jeremiah 1: 4 – 10
 1 Corinthians 13: 1 – 13
 Psalm 71: 1 – 6

Who likes watching movies? Who has seen the movie the “Matrix” starring Keanu Reeves? If you haven’t seen it, and without giving too much away, let me give you a snippet. It’s about the resistance of humans against machines; particularly a computer programme called the Matrix. From their infancy, people are plugged into the Matrix system that creates a false but new sense of reality for humanity. Neo Anderson, Keanu

Reeves, becomes part of the resistance; humans who have managed to remain detached from the system. He is seen by some as the saviour of humanity against the machines. When plugged into the Matrix, Neo and his fellow fighters constantly struggle to battle the powerful agent programmes, particularly “Agent Smith.”

The movie is the first of a trilogy. The third is called the “Matrix Revolution.” In this movie is the final time that Neo and agent Smith face-off against each other. Beaten so badly and lying near death in a muddy puddle, Neo struggles to get back on his feet. As he does so, agent Smith asks: “Why, Mr. Anderson?”

Why? Why do you do it? Why get up? Why keep fighting? Do you believe you're fighting for something; for your survival? Can you tell me what it is? Do you even know? Is it for freedom, for truth, perhaps peace or is it for love? Illusions Mr. Anderson; they're vague misconceptions; temporary constructs of a feeble intellect desperately trying to justify an existence that is without meaning or purpose; and all them artificial as the Matrix itself. Although only a human mind could invent something as insipid as love. You must be able to see it Mr. Anderson; you must know it by now. You can't win; you can't fight it. Why Mr. Anderson? Why do you persist?"

These questions by agent Smith challenge the very core of our existence as human beings; of why we live the way we do as people. They challenge the driving force and essence of our life that gives us meaning and purpose.

Why do we do what we do as Christians?
Why do we believe? Why do we come to church? Why do we want to come to this place at First Church and not some other? Why do we give up our time and resources to be here and to serve in the ways that we do? Do we have nothing better to do? What drives you and me to persist in what we call “faith”? What keeps us involved in the church?

One of the fundamentals of our Christian faith is that our being and purpose is centred in God through Jesus Christ. Christ taught that seeking the kingdom of God was primary (Mt. 6:33). In psalm 71 that we read earlier, we gain an understanding of someone who, despite the difficulties and adversity of life (Ps. 71:10-11), is able to continually trust and hope in God. It shows the reality that faith lives amid adversity. And because of that the psalmist is able to praise God. Praise becomes the language and lifestyle of those who know at all times and in every circumstance that their lives belong to God and that their future depends on God. It is in this spirit that the psalmist understands God has claimed his or

her life from birth and he or she will always belong to God.¹

In this light, we view life not as something to be achieved but as a gift to be received. Therefore, our response to God in faith, praise and service becomes a life-long response and calling, from birth to old age. In the psalmist's own words: "For you, O Lord, are my hope, my trust, O Lord, from my youth. Upon you I have leaned from my birth; it was you who took me from my mother's womb. My praise is continually of you" (Ps. 71: 5-6).

¹ J. Clinton McCann, JR., "The book of Psalms", in *The New Interpreter's Bible Vol. IV*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 539-1280, 960.

Why persist with faith in the face of adversity and struggle? Why continue to praise God under the most testing of times? Well, simply because every part of life, both the struggle and blessings, are encompassed in God. God is central in every aspect of the psalmist's life, including the good and tough times.

This sense of finding one's true identity and life in God is affirmed also through God's calling of the prophet Jeremiah. Before Jeremiah was conceived in the womb God knew him; before he was born God consecrated him and appointed him as a prophet (Jer. 1:5). Irrespective of his own confessed limitations for not knowing how to

speak because he was unlearned as a boy (Jer. 1:6), Jeremiah came to understand his life in terms of God and God's purpose for him: "you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid...for I am with you. See today, I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant." (Jer. 1:7-10).

Jeremiah's prophetic ministry is said to have spanned about 45 years through the reigns of the last few kings of Judah from about 627 – 582 B.C.E. His ministry covered the drama of King Josiah's reform, the failures of the kings

that followed him and the final collapse of the whole nation to the invading Babylonians. In all this time he never stopped preaching against the two major evils of his day: *idolatry* and *injustice*. Jeremiah was relentless even when it led to great personal suffering and persecution.

But he was also tender and filled with compassion for the people, and he often pleaded for people to be converted and come back to the covenant made with the Lord their God, so that the Lord would have mercy. He had great sensitivity both to what God asked and to what people needed. Abraham Heschel, the great Jewish Old Testament scholar,

describes Jeremiah as the prophet of God's *pathos* – the divine sympathy.² When people refused to hear his words, Jeremiah felt the anguish personally. But he felt the pain even more borne by the God they had rejected.

Because the people did not respond to the call of the Lord their God, Jeremiah's words of hope for repentance became fewer and fewer. His message became increasingly unpopular with the people, with other prophets and the rulers of the country leading him into deep emotional distress and isolation. By the time of the last kings, Jehoiakim and Zedekiah, he had despaired that anything could turn back

² Lawrence Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament: An introduction*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 366.

the punishment that the people deserved for their sins.

So why accept this calling and way of life? Why persist with a faith and service that only brings rejection, disappointment and suffering? Like the psalmist, there is the understanding that God and God's purpose is bigger than us. Despite the struggles we face in life, there is something more significant than our troubles. God is that wholly and significant other.

Jeremiah understood and accepted that his life, his very essence belonged to God. God's calling in his life affirmed his worth in God's

plans. His personal worth was tied to the claim that he was made by God and that his worth was recognised even before he was born. He had worth because he was born in the mind and will of God even before entering his mother's womb. Jeremiah was the product of God's creativity, of God's desire – of what I think was God's work of love. This was a love that would be with him and sustain him even in his most difficult of times. This was a love that worked through him for a people and world that God loved also.

It was this kind of love that the Apostle Paul said encompassed everything that he did. It was the fundamental core that prevented his

words from being a noisy gong or clanging symbol and all his sacrificial service from being all for nothing (1 Cor. 13:1-3). It was this kind of love found only in God that “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends” (1 Cor. 13:7-8a). Paul too believed that his life and calling to be an apostle was effected in the love, grace and mercy of God. His belief in God’s love for him and the world, as demonstrated through Jesus Christ, was the driving force pushing him on to fulfil his calling in the face of all the difficulties and hardships he endured; even unto his death. Of all the things he valued in life, Paul rated God’s love as the greatest (1 Cor. 13:13).

We've been through the good and most challenging times of life as individual Christians and as a church. Why do we persist doing what we do? Why not give up and die? As agent Smith asked, "Do you believe you're fighting for something; for your survival? Can you tell me what it is? Do you even know? Is it for freedom, for truth, perhaps peace or is it for love?" Are they "illusions; vague misconceptions; temporary constructs of a feeble intellect desperately trying to justify an existence that is without meaning or purpose?" Is it true that "only a human mind could invent something as insipid as love?"

You may have your own answers to these very challenging questions. But I think we do what we do because God is – we believe in God who is within and beyond us and all we know; a God who loves us in spite of who we are and our shortcomings. We believe in God who loved us first while we were yet sinners and who loved us before we could ever love. We are here today because God’s call on our life is a core value that gives us a reason to live. God, faith and God’s calling are not “illusions” or “vague misconceptions; temporary constructs of a feeble intellect desperately trying to justify an existence.” We continue to persevere as a church because, like for the psalmist, Jeremiah and Paul, God

is and God's love mercy and grace is still at work in and through us.

The last verse of our final hymn affirms why we do what we do. It affirms God in our life and God's calling upon us as individuals and as a church:

Lord, your summons echoes true
when you but call my name.

Let me turn and follow you
and never be the same.

In your company I'll go
where your love and footsteps show.

Thus I'll move and live and grow
in you and you in me.

Amen.