

## Epiphany 5 Year A

Readings:        Isaiah 58: 1 – 9  
                      Psalm 112: 1 -9  
                      1 Cor. 2: 1 – 12  
                      Matthew 5: 13 – 20

For the last few months you've heard me speak of strategic planning and exploring ways of how we can be and do church differently. My desire and vision for us here at First Church of Otago is to grow; to grow numerically, spiritually, relationally and so on. My hope is that as we grow, we will be a positive witness to the good news of Jesus

Christ in our family, neighbourhood, workplace, and wider community.

But society has become increasingly secular and the church is often seen in a negative rather than positive light. The church has been critiqued about its beliefs and practices that are seen as outdated, irrelevant or no longer acceptable to the changing cultural values of society today. Some criticisms of the church from the outside are, in my mind, warranted and they still make headlines in our news today. Not even the popularity of Pope Francis can escape accusations facing the Roman Catholic Church.

Yet critique can make the church reconsider its beliefs and practices. Sometimes the pressure from outside can cause the church to make changes, however small those changes might be.

But I believe significant changes for a faith community happens when critique comes from within it. Christianity did not start off as new religion, but was born from the womb of Judaism by Jews who lived according to a particular understanding of Jesus as the promised messiah. Protestantism, through the likes of Martin Luther and others, was born from the conviction of reforming the practices

of the Catholic Church; not to establish a new church.

Significant changes for any faith community comes from within. These are changes that usually come from disturbing or unsettling situations of the people. Such situations raise questions when things do not appear to be working well; when belief and practice is not aligned. Those on the inside who are affected are usually the ones who begin this critique or self-review.

We get a sense of this self-critique of the faith community from our reading in Isaiah. It

describes a time when the returned exiles from Babylon have gradually re-established themselves in Jerusalem despite it still being in ruins. The people have somehow reverted to some of their old form of false worship. Elsewhere we hear that they are engaging in idolatry (57:13), perverting justice (59:4), and eating unclean foods such as the flesh of swine (65:4).

Something is not right in the community of God's people. There seems to be conflicting views of authentic religion; a mismatch of belief and practice. There are those who day after day seek God and delight to know God's

ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; asking of God's righteous judgements and delighting to draw near to God (58:2). To top off their religious efforts they fast as a way to draw God's attention.

Then there is the insider critique: "Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting will not make your voice heard on high" (v.3-4). The community is indicted for the wrong kind of busyness.

The writer puts in the mouth of busy Israel a cynical, mocking, and shameless self-disclosure (v.3a): “Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why do we humble ourselves and you do not notice?” Israel asserts that it has been religiously enthusiastic and thorough, but such effort has not produced any of the desired results.

The kind of religion that some in the community practiced was at its core purely self-serving: “You serve your own interest.” As such, it was dishonest and unrelated to the realities of life that included the “neighbour question” of economic exploitation. In verse

5, Isaiah points out that a religious life that involves the abuse and exploitation of others is highly questionable and inconsistent with God: “Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?” Such practices demonstrate no true sense of accountability to God; that people who behave this way are indifferent to God and, therefore, indifferent to their neighbour. They do not love God and neighbour.

It is into such circumstances that self-critique speaks of desired change for the benefit of the community. Verses 6 to 9 voice this need for change:

“Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, ‘Here I am.’”

Words of critique or dissent do not mean being disloyal or rebellious to the faith community. Rather they seek to reform it in ways that helps it be faithful to what it truly believes. Seeking God's righteousness is to help the community live right. Psalm 112 outlines the conduct of a "righteous person" who is "happy" in a life of obedience to God's instruction. Such persons are "gracious and merciful" (verse 4), "generous" in "justice" (verse 5), "not afraid" in the world (verse 8), and ready to give to the poor (verse 9). Such persons live a life given over to the well-being of community. They are people influenced by grace and generosity of God who in turn influence others in the community.

Our religious life or practices cannot be self-serving. In God's community there is no room for selfishness and lack of concern for neighbour. In writing to the Church in Corinth, the Apostle Paul taught that our true humanity in Christ enables Christians to live differently in the world (1 Cor. 2:11). Because we have the Spirit of God, we can, as Paul says, "understand the gifts bestowed on us by God" (v.12); gifts to help build up one another in the church, to help us live as the people God called us to be. It is God's Spirit that permeates our life to influence how we might live right by one another and, therefore, influence our community.

I think this was also Jesus' point in our reading from Matthew. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus designates his community of followers as "salt" (Mt. 5:13) and as "light" (v.14), the ones who obey the command to love God and to love neighbour. Just as salt and light influences that which they come into contact with; bringing a different flavour or perspective, so too are Jesus' followers to do the same within their communities. Their "righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees" (v. 20) is not about meticulous moralism or self-enhancement through "goodness." Rather, as biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann commented: "it concerns a

reach beyond the self to the neighbourhood and the world.”<sup>1</sup>

Jesus and his disciples were not creating a new religion, they were rethinking and adapting their Jewish faith. They were trying to live out what they understood was the heart of their faith, of loving God and neighbour, in ways which were different or against the stream of the practices of other religious groups of the time. Quoting Brueggemann again, “Clearly the Jesus community is

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, “The Jesus Community”, retrieved from <http://sojo.net/magazine/2011/02/what-does-our-new-self-look>, 8<sup>th</sup> February 2014.

peopled by folk with energy and courage to live beyond ‘business as usual’.”<sup>2</sup>

The challenge for us today is whether we continue being and doing church as “business as usual?” But more important is whether our religious practices really make any difference to our belief and claim of loving God and neighbour? Do they make a difference to our community here at First Church in terms of growth? Do our beliefs and actions make a difference in our families, our neighbourhood and our wider community of Dunedin?

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

If they do not, then maybe we need to take a closer look at our self and ask some tough questions. Maybe some self-critique is needed. But this does not mean that we are rebellious or unfaithful as Christians and as members. As Dan Clendenin argued, “dissent is not disloyalty. Vibrant faith demands critical vigilance, especially from its own insiders.”<sup>3</sup>

If we want positive and constructive change in our church, family, neighbourhood, work or

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<sup>3</sup> Dan Clendenin, “Isaiah and Jesus: Critical Dissent as a Form of Faith”, retrieved from <http://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20140203JJ.shtml>, 8<sup>th</sup> February 2014.

wherever, then it must begin with us. If we want to connect better with others then it must begin with us. If want to make a difference to our situation then we must seriously consider how we can be salt and light that permeates the relationships we have with others with the grace and generosity of God.

We don't have to keep going with the flow of how things have always been. And we don't have to wait for a presbytery review or a criticism from the public to force us into making changes. We can adapt and do things differently because we have the Spirit of God. This is the same spirit who raised Jesus from

the dead and who, I believe, can help us discern how best to use the gifts we have been given to build up God's community of First Church of Otago. I am confident we can do it together. Amen.