

To 'take up our cross' will mean allowing the Spirit of Christ shape our lives and response to this world.
Matthew 16:21-28

Two Realms

One of the most frequent words I hear in worship with our Toe Talatalanoa Tongan congregation is 'Pule'anga' which means Kingdom.

The phrase most frequently heard is Pule'anga 'o e 'Otua - the Kingdom of God – that Jesus proclaimed the coming reign of God in people's lives and our world.

Significantly, however, in Tongan culture there is another Pule'anga – Pule'anga 'o Tonga – the Kingdom of Tonga ruled by King Tuku'aho Tupou VI

The realm of God and the realm of Tonga

The Kingdom of Tonga has been fortunate in having rulers who acknowledge the source of true human authority is ultimately from God. King Tupou VI who came to the throne in 2012 has already displayed a deeply held and genuine concern for the well-being of his people.

Even so, earthly rulers are only human and not always able to give as clear an expression of the Gospel as some, or they, may wish.

Exegesis

I was reminded of these two kingdoms/realms by Jesus' stern words to Peter in this morning's Gospel. Peter had only just made that profound statement of faith (from last week's reading) that Jesus is the Christ, the anointed one of God. And then in the next breath, when Jesus talks about his own sacrificial death and suffering servanthood, Peter makes the very human response questioning whether this could really be the way of God, only to be rebuked by Jesus: "*You are an obstacle in my path, for you are thinking not as God thinks but as human beings do.*" (Matt 16:23)

Almost immediately Peter has put his foot in it and discovered just how different the ways of God are to the ways of this world, and how hard it is to be faithful to the Gospel in such a world.

It is as if we live in or between two worlds

As I thought about these words it seemed as if we live in or between two realms/two worlds with competing loyalties, and how difficult that can be, especially for political leaders

Many idealistic people have gone into politics believing they will be able to change things only to discover politics can be a cynical world of compromise where, in order to retain power, certain ideals or aspirations seemingly have to be sacrificed.

And that can be our experience as well as we seek to be loyal to Christ and faithful to his teachings in our own lives and relationships, and in public life,

as we seek to make our way through the harsh realities of daily life in this cynical world of ours.

But that is the challenge we face if Christ truly has first call on our lives.

Difficult as it may be, we will only find peace with God, with ourselves and others if we acknowledge the claim of Christ on our lives.

That was the hard and challenging truth Peter discovered that morning when Jesus said to him: "*You are an obstacle in my path, for you are thinking not as God thinks but as human beings do.*"

We discover our identity in relationship with God.

But there is a further thing to add which flows on from last week's reading of Matthew's Gospel when Jesus asked his disciples the question: "*But who do you say that I am?*"

You may recall we discovered there was a strange twist in the question when studied closely.

Although Jesus couched it in terms of himself – “Who do you say that I am?” – the surface question contains a much deeper, perhaps even more profound and disturbing unspoken question:

Who are you, Simon? Who are you, James, John, Andrew, Mary?

That is, we discover our identity through those to whom we offer our loyalty.

We come to know who we are through whom we love and serve.

For example, throughout childhood we are learning and being shaped by the behaviour, attitudes and values of our families; the people with whom we live and relate.

Similarly, just as Jesus discovered his own identity through his relationship with God, so too we discover in our own spiritual formation that if we offer our loyalty to Christ, and seek to live with him, then we will be formed by the values of God’s realm; especially within the life of the church.

That is what it means to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Jesus; to lose life in order to find it.

By committing our lives to Christ we discover our identity:

We come to know who we are through whom we love and serve.

In Christian community we are encouraged in our discipleship

In a sense the Gospel Jesus came to reveal is counter-cultural, challenging many values of this world which encourage self-interest to the exclusion of others;

that if we follow the teachings of Jesus then we may well be out of step with those around us.

That is why being a member of Christian community – the church – is so important.

The church not only helps us to understand the life transforming teachings of the Gospel, but keeps alive the Gospel in our world and gives us the courage to ‘take up our cross’ and faithfully live out the Gospel in our lives and relationships.

Within Christian community we are reminded who it is we love and serve.

As I thought about this I was reminded of something that happened 24 years ago, in 1990 when my placement was with Dee Why Uniting Church.

Like here we had a Tongan Congregation in our parish and, in order to build up a better understanding of one another, and especially the Tongan culture, we organized a trip to Tonga for 48 people from our two congregations, as you did here a few years ago.

As preparation for our visit we organized a series of orientation sessions in which we learnt a little bit of the Tongan language, about Tongan culture, and some of the customs to be observed out of respect for their culture. Because our children, 11 years old Jenny and 9 years old David, were going on the trip with us they also attended the sessions to learn the language and Tongan culture.

One day around this time, when I went to pick up David from primary school, his teacher called me over as she wished to show me something. She explained the special theme for that term in her class was ‘outer space’ and how their maths was calculating the distance of stars and so on. However she had also set a task for the creative writing lesson on the topic: “What would I do if an alien landed in my back yard?” The teacher explained she had been a little surprised and disappointed. Almost without exception, the stories written were quite violent in nature. (It was not long after the violent comedy movie ‘Gremlins’ was released) In their stories the children described how they would destroy the aliens by feeding them into food processors and chopping them up, putting them in microwave ovens and watching them go ‘pop’ and so on. All that is except one child, one nine year old child, who belonged to Dee Why Uniting Church, who wrote the following story:

“If an alien landed in my backyard, I would take its photo five times and send them straight to the news reporter. I would try to learn its language and more about its country and planet! Then I would sit back with my alien friend and wait for the news!”

I have kept a copy of that creative writing task these last 24 years – with the teacher’s comment written neatly on the page: “I hope everyone would be this kind” – to remind myself and give thanks for the formative influence of Christian community on the life of its members.

Yes, as a parent, I was proud of David’s story, but I am also grateful for the formative influence of Christian community that inculcated in Jenny and David a way of life shaped by the values of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the realm of God.

Yes, the Church is a human institution and it is difficult to live out the values Jesus exemplified and taught.

We are not perfect, at times we could do more, but nonetheless at the core of our life together there is a loyalty to Christ and a desire to be faithful to the way of life he has revealed to us, counter-cultural though it may seem at times.

Conclusion

And so it can seem as if we stand between two realms/two worlds
this physical world in which we live and the realm of God.

But if we offer our loyalty to Christ,
and seek to live out the values of the Gospel in this sometimes cynical and hurting world,
difficult as that may be,
then we may just discover our identity – who we are – in relationship with God,
ourselves and one another.

As citizens of the realm of God in this world we will come to know who we are through whom we love and serve.

So then, let us ‘take up our cross’ and follow Jesus.

May that continue to be our desire and inspiration within the life of Canberra City
Uniting Church. Amen