

Counting the Cost

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost (OS 23C)

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One of the interesting mental challenges on our spiritual journey is responding to the problem of dealing with people of other faiths, and especially those of Islam. The issue is:- if I am convinced of the message of the good news (the Gospel), how can I not preach it, but if I convince a Moslem of what I believe, the I sentence them to at best being an outcast from his family and at worst his death. Whereas we can take a certain degree of responsibility for our own lives, but can we act in such a way that would risk the live of others. It is a real issue of faith. Am I convinced enough in what I believed in to convert others at the risk of their own lives?

I not only have to believe, but have to have the courage and confidence to act on that belief. Am I convinced that Christianity is not an option, but an essential for all people of this world? This implies mission in the true sense of the word, and sadly we have lost this concept in the Australian and in particular the Anglican church. We have become self obsessed and inward looking. But our vision should be outward.

It is easy to try and see Christianity as a costless option. We have the thinking that to join a church is something like Rotary or an adult education class. We are inclined to think of our function as a church, as being on a recruitment drive to boost the numbers, but we must be aware that there is a cost involved.

Some years ago, Australia was shocked at the news of the arrest of Diane Thomas and Peter Bunch in Afghanistan. Arrested for what? Preaching Christianity. We don't believe it, because we have been sold the idea that faith is not so important. Indeed, the newsreaders who reported the news are somewhat stunned that this is an offence. We are horrified, that they were threatened with the death penalty in this day and age. On July 19 2019 the Taliban kidnapped 23 South Koreans. The nation was bombarded for weeks by frightening news reports about repeated Taliban promises to kill everyone and about their eventual killing of two. Two female hostages were released Aug. 13 and 19 were eventually freed.

Perhaps this is the reality that we are not prepared to face any more. West Africa was a region known as the 'White Man's Grave'. It was called this because life expectancy for Europeans in this part of the world in the nineteenth century was less than two years. This meant that the British and the French were not able to rule/colonise, and so left in tact the tribal system of leadership - as opposed to South and East Africa. Missionaries travelling to this part of the world packed their coffin as part of the kit.

They may not have died from persecution, but in order to proclaim Christ to those in darkness, they had to be prepared to carry their Cross. The result? 40% of Ghanaians are in church on Sunday. In Australia, we can get 3% if we are lucky.

After telling us that we must be prepared to carry our cross, Jesus goes on to talk about counting the cost. This is perhaps something that we would like to avoid - The thought that it will cost something. Surely this is a barrier to bringing people into the church - well yes and no. Perhaps our problem is that there is too little cost. In the third century, Tertullian wrote that the 'blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church'. The witness of those who held faith above life itself showed to the world that these things mattered, and so the world was drawn to the church and it grew.

If we are considering our purpose is the building up the church here in this place, we have to expect that this may be a costly exercise. I know of your generosity, and the time given by many

to keep things going, but we may have to give up old ideas and old practices to make room for God to do something new.

Now perhaps a good number of martyrs fed to the lions here on the Yorke Peninsula would do wonders for our growth but we seem to be all out of lions, so how is it that we can move forward.

We can find a hundred reasons why we ought to fail but we must look at things in the bigger picture and bring God into the equation. The only reason we will succeed (whatever that means) is that God is faithful. This is the starting point of the whole process, learning to trust God.

Rather than talk of specifics, let us consider the principles behind this.

1. That we have been called by God to work here in this area. Our neighbours, our family and our friends are our mission field. Our primary calling is to help them experience God's love. Our ministry family is present to nurture that love and equip us to serve others.
2. That however small or imperfect we may feel we are, God has called us to a task and has given us all that we need to do that task. Each person has been given talents and gifts by God and as we discover them together we will find new things that we can do. We need to have open hearts and mind, prepared to step out in faith to try new things - we might surprise ourselves and each other in the process. We start by looking at the world and the opportunities it gives us.
3. That although we might learn from other places, our job is to discover how to be church here, and we cannot compare ourselves to anyone else. In the past, we have heard how this church or that parish is 'doing well' and the temptation is to emulate them.
4. That in the community, there are many who would like to be part of us, but do not know how to do so. We are to build bridges to the community, to seek to reincorporate those who have drifted, to find those who have been hurt and bind their wounds and to be a visible presence in the communities in which we live.

And us just affirm some things -

- The faithful few have done wonders keeping the congregations afloat.
- The care that has been taken to keep the buildings in good condition is a witness in itself. We have a good starting position.
- That there have been many difficulties for this district that relate to the general rural decline.

We are called to count the cost and perhaps that is not a command as much as a reminder of what we are already doing. All country parishes have a high costs associated with providing ministry over such large areas compared to city based centres.

Let us then remind ourselves for whom it is we do this for - not our own glory but for our Lord, in response to his generous goodness in giving us life.

AMEN. AMEN. AMEN.