

What is important? What are the things we should aspire to in life? What are the hallmarks of a good life, or even a good Christian life?

These are all good questions, and not ones we should answer with simple platitudes or rote answers, rather they are questions which really sit as parameters for the decisions we make in our whole lives. They are not questions we can answer once and then live by, rather they are questions which we ask as we review our journey.

So often people make assumptions about who we are or what we think – and I suspect we often do the same within others, and maybe even with ourselves. We base our assumptions on our past experiences, or our knowledge of others who behave in that way; or others who express that opinion. The reality is of course that it is rare for people to have an identical opinion or behaviour to someone else, even if they may hold a similar position. It is also unusual for anyone to keep the same position for the whole of our lives – we change often how we express our commitments and our beliefs – even if they stay the same.

Much of our readings today explore what a Christian looks like. It is a difficult question to answer because in a society where so much of religion is a projection of fear, or the worst reporting of the expression of a faith, and yet there are values, beliefs and even practices which are common to most Christians. So often when I am out and about and people find out I am a priest they are surprised. Apparently I don't look like what a priest, or even a Christian might look like – sometimes this is because of gender, or because I am in a pub, or I am smiling or frowning, or I am asking a question, or ... the list could go on. This rarely has anything to do with my behaviour and more to do with the assumptions or knowledge of the person making the comment.

Christianity can be expressed in many different ways, but at its core we are a community of people who believe in God, are active in prayer and are seeking to live the principles of the kingdom of God. A place where all people are valued as being created in the image of God. Where God placed first, and other decisions are made in the light of this commitment.

The passage we hear from Amos this morning also reflects some of this need for us to bring about the Kingdom of God in this place; to believe that we can both transform our own lives and also contribute to transforming the world. On the one hand these verses from chapter 5 are a funeral dirge, a lament – and yet at the same time it contains within it a call to reformation and to change. A call to challenge what is present and to bring about a new order.

The text implies that the audience has already made the choice for good and now presses home to actively pursue good ; but it offers no details on how this can be

done except the broad challenge to “establish justice in the gate”.<sup>1</sup> This passage in Amos holds out a vision of a city transformed by justice because its residents have learned how to make their devotion to its holy place serve the demands of communal justice. This is an appealing vision, no doubt, but Amos offers no prescription to how we hold the tension between our worship and seeking of justice through mission. All Amos does is call the people back to devotion to the God and to the fervent expression of that devotion in multiple forms of worship and mission.

This is the heart of our reality too. Worship is not an optional extra we fit into our busy schedules. Rather it is the source and inspiration for the activity and transformation we seek to create in the whole of our lives.

Amos reminds us that we are agents of change and agents of justice – and we have to believe we can make those changes.

I was thinking about this a lot this week, especially as we have been preparing for the exhibition about the history of WW1 in Queen’s Park. It is confronting material about a community that is devastated by loss, challenged by the fact that long term neighbours and friends are now seen as enemies, and struggling with the limited resources that they have. Exerts from the Kilburn times in 1914 and 15 make little reference to conflicts in Europe, or even to the shrinking of resources, or increase of violence locally. And in the midst of this are conflicting published sermons from local clergy about the way Christians should respond to the growing war effort. On some days it has been difficult reading – but I think in the long term it will be a powerful exhibit that will allow us space to reflect on the pain that conflict causes. It also raises tough questions about what it means to put God first, and how we allow our faith to continue to inform who we are when all around us is changing and at odds with that faith.

And in the shadow of these stories we read today’s Gospel – ‘Jesus what must I do to receive eternal life?’ Jesus explains in a very literal way – why do you call me good and goes on to list the commandments. The man claims he can do all this – so Jesus tells him to give up his wealth and follow him – and the man goes away in grief.

Is this a story about giving up our wealth? Well yes on the one hand it is, but to limit this to a view or a position of the evil of riches actually misses the point of what Jesus is trying to say.

Firstly Jesus wants us to know that Kingdom of God is firstly not about us, but about God. Not about what we do but that God loves.

Again however this is too simple, if we experience God’s love and want to respond to it we need to be prepared to give it all up – to believe that we can change the

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2609](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2609)

world to bring about the Kingdom of God – to work for justice which stems from our worship of this God we love.

When Jesus discusses this with disciples at the end of the passage the first observation Jesus makes pertains to the difficulty that those with wealth have in entering God's kingdom. The disciples -- who were among the lower class and whose perspective had been shaped by a culture that associated wealth with honour, status, and divine favour -- are confused<sup>2</sup>. If those who appear most blessed have more difficulty getting into the kingdom than a camel going through the eye of a needle, then, as they ask, "Who can be saved?"

Despite how it might look, this story of Jesus, the rich and then the disciples are not that different to the other stories Jesus gives about what it means to be a disciple. The rich man's story and Jesus' discussion remind us that all aspects of what it means to follow Jesus upset our deeply ingrained instincts toward self-preservation and security. Jesus does not try to deprive the rich man of his money and power. He asks for more. He tries to claim the man's very own self. The question it raises for us, may be about money, but it is more likely to be about what security we hold onto; what parts of our lifestyle or identity do we try to hold back from God or from our discipleship? Are we able 'let go' of our security to plunge deeper into our faith, to allow our worship to inform how we which for justice in this world?

The answer to these questions may be found in our dialogue with each other, as we try to understand what it means to live out our faith in this community.

There is also something else going on here. It is not just about the story we tell others, but also the story that we tell ourselves. How do we justify to ourselves the way that we live, or share our faith? How we put God first in all the decisions we make, and let our life flow from that. And how in turn do we share this with others in a way that draws them too to a place of faith? In the end – we have to believe we can follow where God leads us.

It reminds me of a poem

#### HOW TO GET THERE

*Go to the end of the path until you get to the gate.  
Go through the gate and head straight out towards the horizon.  
Keep going towards the horizon.  
Sit down and have a rest every now and again,  
But keep on going, just keep on with it.  
Keep on going as far as you can.  
That's how you get there.<sup>3</sup>*

That's how we get to where God leads us. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2640](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2640)

<sup>3</sup> <http://leunig.com.au/works/poems>