

SERMON for Pentecost 15 – September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024.

Readings: Deuteronomy 4: 1-2, 6-9; Psalm 15; James 1: 17-27; Mark 7: 1-8, 14-23

Let us pray:

Creator God,  
you have made us for yourself,  
and our hearts are restless  
until they find their rest in you:  
teach us to offer ourselves to your service,  
that here we may have your peace,  
and in the world to come may see you face to face;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. <sup>1</sup>

This is the Collect which has been my companion this week and it seemed relevant to my thinking in preparing for today. ... my heart **has** been restless, seeking its rest in God!

We are at last moving on from the long discourse of John on Jesus as the Living Bread, now back to St Mark's Gospel and pondering how to live out our lives infused by Christ – allowing Christ to be our guide and nourishment.

Who are we as Christ-followers?

I remember many years ago, I attended a regional conference in Perth, at which the then Archbishop of Perth had invited the Assistant Bishop of London, Bishop Michael Marshall as guest speaker. The theme of the conference was “Rediscovering the Mission Imperative”, and so we were encouraged to be Mission focused, not just as a parish but as individuals as well.

I guess, as we start preparing for the next chapter in the parish, it is worthwhile to start reflecting on who we are. What gives us Hope, what we see as the Good News and what difference that makes to our lives.

The conference came out with some great one-liners, one of the greatest ones was the challenge as to whether we were “Decaffeinated” Christians! Those who relate to “decaffeinated soy lattes” - the type whose Christianity doesn't keep them awake at night!

I guess we all have different reasons why we come to church, Bishop Michael outlined three types of dysfunctional church in one of his talks, and as we, the people, make up the church, who we are affects the type of church this place is.

The first is focused on “*the King without the kingdom*” - in this church the love of Jesus is foremost but there is little outward looking or movement in the church. The call of the gospels and other New Testament writings to mission falls on deaf ears. Today we begin a series of readings from the Epistle of James. His constant call in his writings was to fulfil our faith by action. In fact, in the final verse of today's reading he says:

“Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” [James 1: 27]

In other words, members of this type of church love and worship Jesus but aren't moved by this love to do anything about it.

The second type of church he described was one which focused on “*the Kingdom without the King*”. In this type of church, the congregation are so bound to the social issues of the day that they have no time to stop and worship or recognise Jesus as Lord. He went on to say that this is often the danger in churches which embrace liberal theology to the exclusion of Jesus.

The third type of church has the focus that “*the church IS the Kingdom*” - the idea that they are right, they have “arrived” to the exclusion of everyone else. The church IS NOT the Kingdom but exists to point to the King and the Kingdom.

In reality, of course, there is no such thing as the perfect church, we are all flawed human beings. But that is okay. God loves us for who we are and honours us for what we, in all sincerity, attempt to do to further the Kingdom.

Bishop Michael went on to say that the “job” of the church was to point to God and the kingdom, not to point to itself. As humans, we are created to worship God and to enjoy him for ever. God’s message, as seen so clearly in the teachings and ministry of Jesus, is love. Love God, love one another - that simple. Because the message hasn’t been received and understood, there is a call to service - to mission. While in James’ epistle there is that strong call to action - mission, the only motive for our mission can be love.

In our reading from Mark’s gospel this morning, we sense the frustration which Jesus must have been feeling as he is challenged by the Pharisees. This is not a discussion on washing one’s hands before a meal, it is about whether or not the way we live our lives is truly in line with God’s purpose for us.

The Pharisees had come to gather around Jesus, to hear what he had to say, to see for themselves what all the noise was about, perhaps to trick him into an indiscretion they could turn to their own advantage.

The Pharisees in their zeal for Judaism, had turned their religion from a means into an end, from an affair of the heart to an outward form of external observance.

Rather than move with the times, they had created more laws, rules and regulations. Rather than see how the law affected the least of Israel - usually the widows and orphans - they imposed their often-harsh rules on everyone, and they became obsessive over the smallest things, which usually had nothing to do with God.

Sadly, they became bound up with their own importance, their own rules, not stopping to think about whether this was the life that God was calling them to, whether this is the way to bring others to God. Mind you, we need to remember too, that they thought that they were the only ones who in today’s language, were saved!

Much of the confrontations with Jesus were because he was reinterpreting their traditions in front of them. This Jesus comes preaching too many new things, too much freedom, too much heart and not enough rules and respect for the traditions of the faith. <sup>3</sup>

They were set in their ways and didn’t want to look at the new interpretation which Jesus offered. Like Bishop Michael’s second two examples of dysfunctional churches - the one with the Kingdom without the King and the one that thought it was the Kingdom - they had forgotten the most important ingredient - the King. What was it that God was calling them to be, to do, what was it that God truly wanted from them?

Where do you think we fall with the 3 types of dysfunctional church? Jesus’ call is one to mission, to bind up the broken, care for those less fortunate than ourselves, speak out for the marginalised and injustice where we see it and to connect the world to the love of God in Jesus.

There is so much good which happens in this parish, especially through the ministry of the *Mustard Seed*. After all, the only way to truly communicate the Gospel to the world is by living it.

So, as Bishop Michael challenged us, are we “Decaffeinated Soy Latte” types of Christians, who wouldn’t have a sleepless night, or are we a full-bodied Espresso types who agonize over the bringing in of the Kingdom? It is God’s Mission, not ours, but God needs our help to bring the reality of the Kingdom about.

What is your heart restless for?

How do you / we live out the Gospel?

Where do we see our future ... in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Revd Sally Buckley  
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#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

1. *A Prayer Book for Australia*, Prayer of the week, Ordinary 21, page 574.
2. Reflections from the Eastern & Rural Regional Conference of the Perth Diocese, held at Swanleigh, August 25<sup>th</sup> - 27<sup>th</sup>, 2006. Keynote speakers Most Revd Roger Herft, Archbishop of Perth and Rt Revd Michael Marshall, Assistant Bishop of London.
3. Worship that works - The Rev’d Bunker Hill