

FINAL SERVICE AT TRINITY UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 6 FEBRUARY 2011

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Isaiah 58: 1-9; Matthew 5:13-20

“Shedding Light on the Path of Faith”

Why are we, the congregation at Trinity, moving to merge with St. Aidan's? It would be nice to think that it is out of commitment to the cause of wider Christian unity, and that may have been the case had we been making this move at the time of church union, when both congregations were at close to full strength. But now it is because it has been decided that we are no longer strong enough to go it alone.

So, have we failed? That all depends, of course, on how success and failure are to be measured. In the wider community, value, success and worth are measured largely in terms of size and strength, and consequently the health of the church, the effectiveness of its mission, the truth of the Gospel even are often gauged using the same criteria. The church is deemed to be at its best when it is biggest, most faithful when full of people, strongest when it has a secure place in the esteem of the community at large and when powerful and influential people give it their seal of approval. That is a natural conclusion. But is it true?

Is it true that if the church is faithful to the Gospel, then people are bound to hear and respond? A reading of the Old Testament makes it clear enough that over and over again the people of God are depicted as a small, hard-pressed minority – a ‘faithful remnant’ they are often called. And within that community itself those who called the people back to more than lip-service to God were more often than not themselves despised and rejected. Do you think that Isaiah's call to the people that we heard earlier would have made them sing his praises? ‘Stop giving yourselves high marks for your outward religious observances such as your fasts’ he said.. Instead, ‘Loose the bonds of wickedness, let the oppressed go free, share your bread with the hungry, bring the homeless into you house, clothe the naked and don't turn your back on your own flesh and blood.’ (Isaiah 58:6,7)

Jesus too, who came to fulfil the expectations of Isaiah and other prophets who longed for the coming of God's Chosen One, the one to lead all people into that creative way of life that the Creator will for all, the Kingdom of God on earth as it is sometimes called, Jesus did not rate highly in the popularity stakes either. People in his hometown synagogue listened to what he said, and then threw him out.. Even when he healed some said he did so by the power of the devil. Almost from the beginning of his ministry the leaders were plotting to get rid of him, and at the end the crowds turned against him too. Even his disciples did not want to know.

But why this rejection? Because people did not recognize who he was? True, they did not acknowledge him as Son of God, but why? This is why – because he did not say and do what they expected, and because he called them to a life they did not want. Along with the prophets before him, he was calling them back to live the life the Creator intended. The Law, the commandments, God's prescription for the good life, not arbitrary demands from a despotic deity but guidelines for a harmonious community – don't think any of that is outmoded, said Jesus, true today as always. (Matt. 6:17, 18)

And don't be content with outwards observance as the scribes and Pharisees are, live out your beliefs in everyday action. As well, Jesus warned his followers, then and now, that they well be in for the same treatment as he. In the Beatitudes that Matthew records just before today's Gospel

reading, where Jesus laid down the path for the faithful to follow, he warned at the end that they would be persecuted too, as the prophets before them, 'for righteousness sake' that is, for doing the right thing.

What I've been saying amounts to this – That if we present the Gospel clearly and cogently, and if we are true to that Gospel in our lives as individuals, as a congregation and as the Uniting Church,, it does not necessarily follow that this will have widespread popular appeal; perhaps just the opposite. And if we do not take account of that as a congregation as we move into a new future, we will not get to the heart of the matter at all.

Now of course there is a big danger in all this. We can be unpopular, we can make the Gospel unpopular, for all the *wrong* reasons. We should not comfort ourselves by concluding that diminishing numbers necessarily confirm that we have been on the right track all along.. People have been alienated from the church because its members have not always been 'salt of the earth' that preserves the best and enhances the lives of our neighbours. We have not always been 'light to the world' that encourages people to follow the way of Christ. People have not always seen in our works an authentic embodiment of our words. But when all that has been said, and I would want to acknowledge this and my part in it as clearly as any, there is still at the heart of the Gospel something that is inherently and persistently unpopular, reversing the priorities usually set for success and achievement.

How *can* the way of Jesus possibly have widespread appeal?. Forgiving seventy times seven, returning good for evil, turning the other cheek, doing good to those who hate you – "How weak-kneed can you get?" I hear our detractors say. Love your enemies – whatever happened to patriotism? In honour giving way to each other –that's no way to get ahead! Whoever would be greatest must be servant of all – what kind of ambition is that? But whatever the failings of the church, that is what the Gospel of its Lord Jesus Christ is all about – setting others at the centre of our concern – and that goes against the grain.

So, how can we expect people to follow that path? Well really, only when they have a change of heart, and actually believe that the way of Jesus is the way God wills for us all, the way that enhances human life and makes for a healthy community, and believing that enough to begin to walk that way, in the strength God alone can provide.

And that is the heart of the Gospel too – that our past failures are not held against us and that we are given the willingness and capacity to begin again. That is a word we need to take to ourselves, today perhaps more than ever.

Our prayer

*Eternal God,
whose Son Jesus Christ embodied your will for us all, life at its most creative
We thank you for all that makes that life a reality in today's world.
For Word and sacrament
For your faithful servants past and present
For love and strength that comes from you in unexpected ways
Through your Son Jesus Christ who was the light of the world
Enable us to reflect that light in our lives
For in his name we pray
Amen*