

“Called to Daring Discipleship”

Sermon preached by Rev Laurel Barr on June 22, 2008

Matthew 10:24-39

Bruce Pike is the main character in Tim Winton’s new novel “Breath”. He knows what it means to go to the extremes, to flirt with death and to push every boundary. Excited and exhilarated after surfing the biggest waves near his boyhood home for the first time, he reflects: *When you make it, when you’re still alive and standin’ at the end, you get this tingly-electric rush. You feel alive, completely awake and in your body. Man, you’ve felt the hand of God.*

As Pike and his friends set out for home, his imagination was racing *We didn’t know it yet but we’d already imagined ourselves into a different life, another society, a state for which no raw boy has either words or experience to describe. Our minds had already gone out to meet it and we’d left the ordinary in our wake.*

In another context where the stakes are much, much higher, the early Christians also felt “the hand of God”. This came as Jesus caught their imaginations with a view of God’s world where the sick are healed, the dead are raised, demons are cast out, sinners are forgiven and outcasts are welcomed. Now in the storyline of Matthew’s Gospel Jesus has just called his twelve disciples and is sending them out on their first mission. Essentially their mission is to do what they have witnessed Jesus doing.

As he instructs his disciples before they set out, Jesus warns them -yes they will enjoy with the same highs of welcome and gratitude from the crowds of folk struggling to survive from day today that Jesus himself experienced but more ominously they will face dangers arising out of hostility of the religious leaders and those who prosper under the status quo in the Roman Empire. The picture of discipleship that Jesus presents is not unlike going out into the churning ocean with its wonders and its terrors - once you have committed and you are out there there’s no way back - you either drift on your board exposed to the elements and the currents and paralysed by your fears or you face your fear, take up the challenge and ride the wave.

The writer of Matthew’s Gospel wrote these words of Jesus to an early Christian community who were experiencing precisely these highs and lows some forty plus years later. If we had read earlier in Chapter 10 we would see that Matthew’s community already knew what it was to be maligned and dragged before courts and councils and interrogated. They already knew what it was to be flogged in the synagogues and even to be betrayed by family members because they believed Jesus to be the Messiah of God. Matthew wrote in turbulent times when being a Christian was risky and dangerous. “They suffered loss of family, place, security, respectability” and some even lost their lives for the sake of Christ.” (2)

Matthew is writing then to encourage them to hang in there and not to lose their nerve. He reassures them: the truth will be come out. You will be vindicated. Do not be afraid - God knows what is happening to you. God loves you and values you tenderly. You are not alone - the community of Jesus’ disciples is your new family and your sacrifice will not be in vain for you will find life.

And anyway these early Christians should not have been surprised when they experienced such misunderstanding and persecution since as Keith Rowe puts it this week in “*With love to the World*”, “Jesus lived in a storm and why should it different for disciples who follow the same path?”

This is a tough passage in Matthew’s Gospel - It is not for the faint-hearted - very suitable perhaps as we pass the Winter Solstice when the days are shortest and the nights longest and there is some madness

about! In particular those words about dividing families and Christ not coming to bring peace but a sword - I don't know about you but that is one of those passages that I wish had never been written -

I wish Jesus had never said them or other harsh words like "Follow me and let the dead bury their own dead" and when Jesus mother and brothers tried to speak to Jesus and he replied "Who is my mother and who are my brothers?" Is this the same Jesus who had healed so many people with compassion and gentleness and the same Jesus who said "Blessed are the peacemakers" and "Suffer the little children to come to me"?

Is this the One who called his followers "little children" and who in a tender story told in John's Gospel fulfilled his responsibilities as a son even as he was dying on the cross when he handed his mother into the care of the beloved disciple.

These harsh words of Jesus also seem to fly in the face of what we say in the Wedding Service when we talk about marriage and family as an important and firm foundation for society to be built upon. These days we hear a lot about "Christian family values" and for many of us this is very fundamental and important. Indeed for many staying together as a family is the very expression of Christian faithfulness.

What is happening here? These words of Jesus seem to cut away at the very threads that bind our society together.

It is important to understand here that for those early followers of Jesus even more than for us, the thought of a divided family was fearful stuff. At least in Australia today we have government welfare structures in place and we live in a culture in which the individual has a place. But in first century Mediterranean society, the family was all people had for security and safety. Broken relationships meant more than deep hurt - and Christians thrown out of their families lost not only their inheritance including land, but also the protection of their family identity and connections in a time when life was pretty vulnerable. (2)

For the Jewish Christians broken families meant being excluded from their synagogue and finding themselves outside their Jewish cultural group. So you can see the people in Matthew's church needed courage - they were as the saying goes, all at sea without their normal bearings or a traditional anchor. And even today in some places such as in Bali for example where Hinduism defines everyone's place and responsibilities, it still happens for those who become Christians.

You and I thankfully are not often called to leave our families or even to face death because of our faith in Jesus Christ - but does this mean that those early Christians have a different calling from us?

What does this passage say to us?

Firstly at a most basic level, as we look back on this anniversary day of the Uniting Church, we are reminded that we should never take the church for granted. We have much to give thanks for: We have received the Gospel and we are here today because others in that first generation and down through the centuries including the church Reformers were courageous enough to trust Jesus and to pay a cost for speaking the truth. What we are today and what we have together as a church is priceless treasure we should cherish - it is not something to receive lightly on the one hand or to hold onto as if it belongs to us on the other hand. We live in and we carry forward a priceless hard-won inheritance.

Secondly today as we read the Gospel story, we come face to face with the Christ who calls us into a commitment of the highest order. As Fred Craddock the biblical scholar says, "*Jesus gave his call for*

loyalty over against the strongest, not the weakest, claim a person otherwise knew, the claim of family love. Jesus never offered himself as an alternative to the worst but to the best in society.” (2)

I personally find Barbara Brown Taylor 's insights very helpful here - Allow me to put her words into my situation: *“I am a daughter, a wife, a daughter-in-law, a sister, an aunt, and each of these identities has shaped my life, but none of these contain me. I am Laurel. I am Christian. I am a child of God. That is my true identity and all the others grow out of it... you are God’s child first. That is no role. That is who you most truly are....” (2)*

In other words Jesus’ most basic call upon our lives cuts deeply to our core being as a person - when everything else is stripped away, all we have is our dependence upon God and all we have to offer to others is the life-giving love and grace we have already received in Jesus Christ. Such love surrounds and challenges those other institutions in our lives - including our family - when we are tempted to name them rather than God as the One in whom we trust and find our security and meaning.

Finally when Jesus calls us to be faithful witnesses and persistent disciples he presents us with a challenge even bigger than the one Bruce Pike faced as he paddled a mile out to sea past the safety of the headland to catch the waves that were heralding the cold front off the Southern Ocean. It’s a challenge as big as that faced by pilgrim people who have left the security of home behind to travel over the smooth highways and rough bumpy roads along the way towards their destination.

And it’s a challenge like one I remember when as a university student I did some tutoring of aboriginal students: Before we started my lecturer, Dr Ellis quizzed us all - these children have had people coming and going all their lives so that they have learnt not to trust people like you. Are you prepared to commit yourselves for the long-haul - to take the difficult days with the better days? Are you prepared not only to do something **for** these children but to really get to know them?

Today’s Gospel asks challenging and probing questions of us: Are we willing to commit to living out our calling as disciples of Jesus and engage with people wherever and whoever they are - Will we allow the Gospel that Jesus calls us to proclaim “to shake up our values and rearrange our priorities” (2) - even to make a stand for justice or compassion and to be controversial against a swell of opposition? Are we ready to receive that Gospel which is like a sword that slices away everything in our lives and world that is not compatible with the kingdom of God - to pray to God to help us to let go of any prejudices and fears that trouble us and cloud our openness to others? Are we ready for the adventure Christ calls us to embrace: daring, risky discipleship?

And if we are, Jesus has encouraging words for us - Eugene Peterson translates them this way: *“Don’t be bluffed into silence by the threats of bullies. There’s nothing they can do to your soul, your core being. Save your fears for God, who holds your entire life -body and soul - in his hands...This is a large work I’ve called you into, but don’t be overwhelmed by it. It’s best to start small. Give a cool cup of water to someone who is thirsty, for instance. The smallest act of giving and receiving makes you a true apprentice. You won’t lose out on a thing...” Amen. (2)*

(1) Tim Winton, *Breath*, Hamish Hamilton, p.76

(2) From reflection by Kate Huey, “Daring Discipleship”, Weekly Seeds, United Church of Christ, USA, i.ucc.org/StretchYourMind/Opening the Bible/WeeklySeeds 17/06/2008.

(3) Eugene Peterson, *The Message*.