

## Sermon preached by Warwick van Ede at Roseville Uniting Church on Sunday 26th June 2011

### A rabble....inspired by the Holy Spirit!

This week we are going to continue with the theme introduced by Jacqui a couple of weeks ago on Pentecost Sunday, regarding the gifts of the Spirit...

One of the purposes of us following this theme, which will continue in following weeks, is to enable us to think more carefully about how we might allow the Spirit to work more deeply in our lives, both as individual followers of Jesus, and as a community of faith.

And so today we have this reading from Matthew's gospel, which on the face of it has very little to say on this topic...we will return to it in a moment...

.....I am truly coming to love having a teenager around the house...well, coming to love certain aspects of having a teenager around the house...one thing that I really appreciate is the blossoming mind, the grappling with the important issues of life, the acknowledgement that Dad's Midnight Oil CDs might not be so bad after all,....and, then there are things I don't appreciate quite so much...which we won't go into here...

As I have been preparing for this morning and thinking about the reading over the last couple of weeks, I had brought to my attention another teenage characteristic...the pack mentality...sometimes teenagers can be like a pack of sharks when they smell blood in the water...they just move in for the kill...often (dare I say it ) with girls, the target seems to be someone in the same year....but in the particular instance I want to share with you, the target is a scripture teacher....

A few weeks ago you might remember that we had David Bosma from REACH speaking to us, telling us about the ministry to high schoolers in Chatswood and Willoughby High Schools with which our Youth pastor, Michaela Antill, is involved.

At my daughter Sophie's high school there is a similar sort of program, which seems mostly to be "manned" (and I use that word deliberately) from the local Anglican church. This year they have offered up an earnest young fellow, probably no more than 21 years old, and the students, sensing the sheer inexperience and naivety of this young man, have made it their mission to ask him every possible difficult theological and embarrassing question they can dream up – indeed I think they have an *ad hoc* committee set up specifically to plot his humiliation.

There is part of me which finds some amusement in this, not so much at the fate of this young man, as at the arrogance of those who think that this is as good as my daughter and her friends deserve – that some young person with virtually no theological training of any merit, no life experience, and limited communication skills will be anything but a lamb to the slaughter for these students. However, when it comes down to it, this young man stands in a fine tradition, as seen in the gospel we are looking at today – he is a hopeless shambles, with only the Spirit of God, and his love of Jesus, bringing any value to what he does.

Before we leave this morning, I hope that we can think a little bit about how we in fact stand in that great line of people being a rabble, how we are reliant on Jesus, and how we might do something to facilitate his work in this world generally, and in this community in particular. So, let us return to this passage from Matthew.

In order to get any sense of what this short passage is about, one needs to go back to the beginning of the Chapter, Ch 10. The entire chapter is concerned with Jesus sending out the disciples, and is a discourse of what he says to them as he does so.

When I mentioned my daughter's scripture teacher a moment ago, I said that he said that he stands in a long tradition of shambolic representatives of Jesus.....I was referring to a tradition beginning with these very people, the disciples. At your leisure...later.. I invite you to read through the gospels and get a sense of what a hopeless bunch they really were.

Often time, they just didn't have a clue...they were theologically illiterate, they misunderstood Jesus' mission, they got sidetracked by arguments between themselves, and on issues which really didn't matter, and they thought that they were more important than they really were...am I reading out a description of the disciples, or of the followers of Jesus today? The rabble, it seems, continues....

Indeed, it was not actually until after Pentecost that the disciples begin to carry out their ministry with any sense of authority and purpose.

Jesus is sending them out, but he *knows* that they are a bit of a rabble, so his directions to them are about as simple as he can make them.....preach that the kingdom of God is at hand, heal the sick, and cast out demons....surely they can't get that wrong?

Having given them these directions however, and probably having made the disciples, given their nature, feel that they were pretty important, things take an unexpected turn.

"By the way" Jesus says, " I can't say that you will necessarily be well received...there's a good chance that you'll be booted out of the Synagogue, occasionally you'll get beaten up and run out of town, and people are going to come after you because you have caused division in their families.... *and* you're just going to have to be prepared for this sort of stuff if you're going to be my followers...."

....you can feel the disciples' sense of self-importance diminishing rapidly....

And so we come to the passage for today-

*Matthew 10:40-42*

*"Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward."*

What's it about – what does it mean?

Within this theme that we are following, of the Holy Spirit's gifting, it seems to me that this passage is timely, because it reminds us to think about two things –

1. How do we respond to God's gifts? and
2. How do we respond to others?

**How do we respond to God's gifts?**

Even though they *were* a rabble, the disciples at least responded to Jesus by setting forth. You can imagine that Jesus' warnings were fairly spot on – here were a bunch of uneducated, fairly unreligious, completely unknown yobs, going around the countryside and upsetting the good, pious, religious folk, so it is not surprising that they would have met their fair share of tribulations as they went.

How is it that we will respond to the promise of the Holy Spirit for each one of us, giving gifts to each of us, for the benefit of all of us?

Like the disciples, you *can* feel important, special, because of the significance of Pentecost for us as the follower of Jesus today, and as outlined by Jacqui a couple of weeks ago. *Unlike* the disciples, I don't need to bring you a list of warnings for your physical wellbeing as you consider these gifts, although if you go to a Synagogue and start exercising some of them, you could still get thrown out – come to think of it, you could get thrown out of some churches for exercising some of them too!

But, by and large, the gifts of the Spirit are a cause for celebration, not consternation, so what is holding us back from embracing them and celebrating them enthusiastically?

It is probably fair to say that for us to start thinking about Spiritual gifts can be somewhat overwhelming – we get given lists of gifts and think “Wow – I don't know where to start! I've never really thought about it that carefully!”

Jacqui gave you a couple of lists a week or two ago, and here they are – what are you going to do about it? No, I understand that looking at a list like that can seem impossible, and understand that considering and responding is something that takes time, prayer and probably even talking to others, so the whole idea of thinking about this subject in a series is to give you that time, and there will be opportunities to respond and explore further over the next several weeks.

Just to give you something to start thinking about I have reproduced the list from the screen for you to take away on a bookmark-sized piece of pink paper that you'll find at the end of your pew.

Just before we leave this aspect of our consideration this morning, let me say a couple more things.

Firstly, I've never really been one for lists, and I highly doubt that the work of the Holy Spirit is confined to specific attributes contained in certain lists written down by the apostle Paul in the first Century – helpful as those lists are.

Secondly, if the rabble that was the disciples could overcome their fears and difficulties, then surely we can at least pause to consider what it is that God might be offering us, and how we might exercise that for the benefit of the entire community here at the Roseville Uniting Church? For, as Jacqui put it to you, if these gifts are given for the building up of us all, then the corollary of that is that we are less blessed for them *not* being exercised.

So, take your list away, read it, pray about it, and start considering whether there is a response to God which you are yet to make. Being open to His working is the first part of what is suggested by today's reading – we might still be little more than a rabble, but we can be, to paraphrase our Vision Statement here at the Roseville Uniting Church, a rabble empowered by the Holy Spirit.

### **How do we respond to others?**

The second part of what can be drawn from today's reading is the way that we are called to respond to others, both from within and from outside of our community.

I imagine that these words of Jesus at the end of Chapter 10 came as something of a relief to the disciples as they contemplated being beaten up, run out of town, pursued by all manner of people, and ejected from the Synagogue.

Although they don't actually say it, the words Jesus uses seem to imply that these unpleasant reactions will not be the only kind of reactions that the disciples receive, that indeed there will be times when they are received as righteous men, as prophets, and as representatives of God.

Furthermore, Jesus seems to be saying, for his wider audience as much as anything, that to recognize and celebrate someone who is representing *him* will bring its own reward.

Now, I have to confess that there are times when I am less than gracious about other members of the rabble who, in what they do, may be seeking to represent Jesus' mission, even though I am myself a card-carrying member of the identified rabble. One of the problems, it seems to me, is that we are all human, and when humans set out to represent Jesus' mission, there are bound to be failures and disappointments, even putting aside issues we might have with each others' personalities.

Historically, it is Christians who have been a significant stumbling block to people coming to faith, because those who claim to represent Jesus can do a pretty bad job, and often in a very public fashion – we need only look at the way in which the Church has had to have been brought kicking and screaming to deal with the issue of clergy abuse – something thankfully which our Uniting Church has been a the forefront of dealing with in constructive and healing ways.

Popes, Bishops, Ordained Clergy, Ministers, Youth Workers, Lay Pastors, Lay Preachers, Elders, our fellow men and women members in the pews – all ostensibly representing Jesus – all human – often extremely gifted – often extremely difficult to welcome for one reason or another.

The thing is, in the absence of us being open and receptive to receive each other and our respective gifts, we are all diminished, as is Jesus' mission. The success of the disciples in the passage from Chapter 10 of Matthew's gospel required, if not *everyone* who heard them, then at least *some* people to respond with openness and hospitality to the message which they brought, and the same remains true today.

Jesus, in today's reading, gives us a place to begin - "*and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple — truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.*"

It is generally agreed by scholars that the reference to "these little ones" is a reference to his followers, though not necessarily just the 12 disciples.

A cup of cold water...

Even in the context of 2000 years ago, a cup of cold water might be considered the baseline level of hospitality – you couldn't get much lower without being *inhospitable*.

So, Jesus is saying, make some sort of effort when responding to those among you who come in my name – don't just offer a cold shoulder, but rather a metaphorical cup of cold water, and see where the conversation takes you – explore what each other has to offer, listen to what each other has to say, accept what is offered, give something, anything, of yourself in return, and allow the Spirit to work more deeply in your lives.

### **A rabble...inspired by the Holy Spirit**

We are a rabble...but not merely a rabble left to our own devices, having to make things up for ourselves, or without guidance...the great thing about the post-Pentecost church is that we have the Holy Spirit, gifting and guiding us as we travel together as followers of Jesus and seek to understand and work out His mission in the world, and in particular, here in this place.

God has so much for us...if only we can learn to be open and receptive to Him, and to what he would have us do...and if we can learn to become more open and hospitable to one another, in the gifts that we each bring in the exercise of that mission.

As we continue on this journey over the next few weeks I invite you to continue to consider your "bookmarks", to pray, to consider the scriptures, to talk with others, and to be ready to respond.

May God bless each one of us.

Amen.

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