

faith and the deepening of our own spirituality

a sermon preached on the
the third sunday after Epiphany

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at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

by mother emily fraser

the lections: Jonah 3:1-10; Psalm 62; 1 Corinthians 7: 29-31; Mark 1: 14-20

There is so much energy in today's readings.

In the reading from Jonah, the people of Nineveh hear Jonah's words about the impending overthrow of the city and, in fear, and dread and pleading that this will not come to pass, they humble themselves and wail and grieve, covered in ashes and sackcloth and fasting from food and drink. God hears their lamentation, and the destruction of the city is averted, which is good news for the people of Nineveh. But we're left with an image of a God who must be appeased to prevent calamity, and, who, if our pleas are successful, will spare us from such things.

The reading from the first letter to the Corinthians is filled with eschatological energy – the end times are coming, and coming very soon, argues Paul – so there's no point in focusing on human relationships, in celebrating joyous occasions or consoling one another over our grief and losses, in focusing on possessions and what we have in this world, nor any point in getting involved with the ways of the world.

There's a different energy in today's passage from the Gospel according to Mark, where we hear of Jesus calling Simon and Andrew and James and John, calling them to follow him.

Jesus' invitation to them, that they should "follow me and I will make you fish for people" made me reflect on the nature of our Christian calling, what it means to have followed Christ and become Christian.

Those ten words that Jesus calls out with to Simon and Andrew and James and John are thornier than they may seem. As usual, it's not to do with what Jesus said, but how we've come to interpret them and the meaning we have assigned to them.

One huge risk with these particular words is that it may make the faith seem purposed around its propagation, about preaching it widely and ensuring more and yet more people come to believe. In other words, we become too focused on just how many people there are who believe the same way we do, and ensuring that number only increases rather than decreases.

Huge energies are spent worrying about the future of the Church, about the future about individual parishes, with great concern that too few people are hearing the words of the Bible and becoming Christians. We seem to be perpetually concerned not with the depths of our own spirituality, through which we encounter God more and more profoundly, but rather with the breadth of the Christian message and how many people it might reach and convert.

We've turned faith – which is something precious and individually felt and experienced and wonderful – into a matter of numbers and data which can be accounted and tallied and quantified. That is a tragedy. It is the depersonalisation of faith into something organised and sterile. The incarnation was the humanising of God, through the birth of Christ, and by turning faith into a story of numbers and success and quotas and percentages, we're dehumanising it.

The hard truth is that we are not called into the Christian faith to convert others. That's not why we attend Church. That's not the basis of our belief. Neither is it why we read Scripture, engage in prayer, or participate in the Eucharist.

We are called into the Christian faith by God, in an act of extraordinary love, and we are called into the faith to continually experience God's love, and to enter into relationship with God.

Christ did not come to recruit people into a club or a society, whose members ascribe to certain rules, regulations and traditions and whose task is to keep them alive for subsequent generations of members. Christ came to call people into relationship with God, as children of God.

Christ's incarnation was a revelation – a revelation of God – and an invitation – an invitation to know God.

So, what counts is not how many souls we've saved for Jesus, how many people we can claim to have introduced to Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Saviour. No. Nor are those the point of a Christian's life or ministry.

What counts is our own relationship with God - that inner spirituality through which we discover ourselves and God more and more, and spending time attending to this relationship with care and attention. They are what are important, and what we should be spending our energies upon.

This is not pointless introspection or introversion. It's very much the point of our faith.

What we do as Church – public prayer and communal worship - are expressions of that relationship with God. But they are also secondary. They are secondary because they grow out of our individual relationship with God, which is the cornerstone of faith and belief.

And yes, it's reasonable to ask why we should engage in this inner journey. What benefit does it have? How can it possibly be of any use?

Well, in order to walk, one must first learn how to crawl, and in order to be able to voice what one's faith means, and how it and share with those we encounter, we need to have understood what our faith means not just in a rational sense, by which I mean the ability to correctly answer questions of dogma and teaching, but in a deeply emotional and non-rational sense. We need to know what our faith makes us feel just as well as we know what it makes us think, and we need to engage with our faith on an emotional level as well as an intellectual one. And when we do, we don't actually need to share our faith by handing out flyers and leaflets and brochures, we share it by the way we live and the love we show to the world around us.

So my prayer for us all, is that we attend to that which nurtures and grows our inner faith, and in attending to our inner faith, it may permeate all that we do, and outwardly shine into the world, as our testament to the love of God which inspires all we do, and shapes our lives. And in that way, our faith is spread anew because it is being lived out, not abulated, and we, rather than living in fear and panic, are living with hope and love.

curate.emily@stjohnscamberwell.org.au