

18 June 2017 Second Sunday after Pentecost
Genesis 18:1-15, Matthew 9:35-10:8

Some Celtic wisdom: (Carmine Gadelica)

*I saw a stranger yestere'en;
I put food in the eating place, drink in the drinking place
and in the sacred name of three, he blessed myself and my
house, my cattle and my dear ones,
and the blackbird sang outside,
'often goes the Christ in guise of a stranger'.*

Abraham and Sarah had visitors, and in true eastern style they treated them to a feast – how were they to know these guests were messengers, who would speak with the voice of God? Yet as was their want they treated them royally anyway – with compassion and generosity. And Sarah laughed at the impossibility of what they suggested – that she, an old woman way past menopause, and Abraham, an old man that he was, would be fruitful! Of course she laughed ... though the promise had been there, from the beginning, and she had tried to make it happen in other ways. The absurdity of it – yet here they were, the messengers, affirming that the promise would be fulfilled, and soon ... a mother of many nations. When hope seems laughable God bestows new life. 'Often goes the Christ in guise of a stranger'.

And we read of the Christ, Jesus, seeing his people 'harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd' and he is deeply moved – with the urgency of spreading the message; of caring for them.
people are ready
ripe for harvest –
There's no time for mucking around –
The fields must be harvested now.
Like Moses he commissions successors to get out there –
They are named ...
and our names are hidden in there too.

He calls them to speak, to tell the story – to be God’s healing presence in the world – to bring life in unexpected places, like Abraham and Sarah’s three visitors, and to receive hospitality. The visitors came and were treated with generosity and respect.

They brought a message – unbelievable – a message of life – new life.

Jesus’ compassionate healing empowered others to share his story – that God is near, nearer than we realise. The message is urgent and clear. We too are to be Christ bearers, God bearers, and be open to the God in others, to respond with openness and generosity to those we meet.

The messengers to Abraham and Sarah were enabled to share their message after sharing a meal.

Sarah, of course, laughed – at what seemed impossible. She laughed, and went on laughing, and people will laugh at us.

‘Healing is impossible’ they’ll say.

‘Life is impossible – in this relationship, this situation – you have got to be joking!

life!? – for me? now?’

Our answer to them must be a resounding yes – a life-affirming, healing, always, yes!

That does not mean we won’t die. It does not mean we will avoid illness. It does not mean we will steer clear of sticky situations. But, it does mean we are not alone. It means we can face difficulties with other possibilities – with hope and strength and community.

There is a Michael Leunig cartoon that goes like this:

There they were in the doctor’s waiting room; each with their own sickness.

Bob with his bobolosis Emma with emmaditis

Peter with peterenterities Freda with fredamania

Mavis with mavis fever Harry with harry’s syndrome.

Each of them suffering from being who they are: each seeking a cure for the ordinary oddness of existence.

But alas, the doctor can't see anyone today. He's slumped in his chair suffering from acute doctor phobia. There is no cure for anyone. Eventually everyone becomes FULL BLOWN.

Our task, I suggest, is to embody the compassion of Jesus to stand alongside, to be with, to encourage, affirm, care, release, to allow people to be who they are – rather than seeking a cure for the 'ordinary oddness of existence' . To demonstrate they are okay – and loved 'with no conditions ...'

What are some practical examples of this?

Have you seen the musical film 'Billy Elliott'? I thoroughly enjoyed it.

Set during the miners strike in Maggie Thatcher's England, young Billy Elliott is eventually enabled to use his gifts, his talent, his passion – and dance – and is supported by the struggling mining community to attend his audition with the royal ballet. His teacher supports him, and strikers dig deep, as does a scab worker. They all pull together for this vision for Billy and contribute financially – to Billy's humanity – his healing – and this empowers them. It's wonderful! But who is the teacher here and who are the learners?

At the end of Matthew's gospel, we find Jesus telling his representatives to go and do what he did as a representative of God. Make learners! What were they to learn? Precisely what they had learned from Jesus! And what was that?...

If we move backwards, rapidly, through Matthew's gospel, we pass the talents and oil parables which tell us to keep love alight and alive. We pass through warnings and encouragements and lots of real-life examples to a scene where Jesus sits on a mountain like Moses, and like Moses, speaks about God's law (5:1-2). There we see that the learning is about going backwards behind commands to

attitudes: behind murder to hate; behind adultery to lustful exploitation; behind oaths to straightforward honest talk. Hate and revenge must go and love and reconciliation come. Jesus' strategy, however, is not to set up ideals, but to create communities of learners where the experience of love breeds love and generates the change that the world needs.¹

John Bell tells this story²:

I met him on the train, and before long I felt I knew him, I felt I could trust him.

He was in education: "learning for life" he called it.

I said I was interested in education too, so he invited me to come with him to where he taught and learned.

It was off the main road, near the fire station. It didn't look like a school...

You walked in the door of a secondhand shop and, going through the back, you came to a big room with a lot of people in it. We stood and looked around.

pause

In the corner was an old man with a white stick. Beside him sat a girl reading him the newspaper.

"Nice to see young folk helping the blind," I said.

"Oh," he replied, "he's actually teaching her how to see."

Across the floor, in the direction of the toilets, came a wheelchair. A paraplegic boy of 18 sat in it and a boy same age pushed it.

"It's great when friends help each other," I said.

¹ Reading Matthew from the End William Loader Seasons of the Spirit TM Congregational Life Pentecost 1 (p.57) Learning & Serving June 15-21 2008

² adapted from p15ff 'The Teachers' in 'He was in the world' 1995 Wild Goose Resource Group, Iona Community, Glasgow,

"Yes," he replied, "the boy in the chair is teaching the other how to walk."

An old woman lay in a bed at the bottom of the room. She was covered with open sores. A woman, much her junior, was dressing her wounds.

"Is she a nurse?" I asked.

"Yes," he replied, "the old woman is a nurse. She is teaching the other how to care."

Seated round a table were a group of young couples. A doctor in a white coat was talking to them about childbirth.

He spoke slowly and used sign language with his friends.

"I think it's only fair that deaf people should know about these things," I said.

"But they do know about these things," my friend replied. "They are teaching the doctor how to listen."

And then I saw a woman on a respirator, breathing slowly. These were her last breaths. And around her were her friends, smoothing her brow, holding her hands.

"It's not good to die alone," I said.

"That's right," he replied, "but she is not dying alone. She is teaching the others how to live."

Confused and not knowing what to say, I suggested we sit down.

Pause

After a while, I felt I could speak.

"Seeing all this," I said, "I want to pray.

I want to thank God that I have all my faculties.

I now realise how much I can do to help."

Before I could say more, he looked at me straight in the face and said,
"I don't want to upset your devotional life,
but I hope you will also pray
to know your own need.

And I hope you will never be afraid to be touched by the needy."

...

'Often goes the Christ in guise of a stranger'.

Susanna