



Hospital for sinners

18 June 2017

Revd Jenny Wilkens

Genesis 18:1-15, 21:1-7; Romans 5:1-8

Matthew 9:35-10:8



http://www.stlukesinthecity.org.nz/sermons_pid_22.html

One of the things I like about the view from my study, is that when I sit writing, I am looking out the window onto several trees. In recent weeks I've had the delight of watching two interlocking trees, actually over the fence, but within my view, and one tree has had brilliantly coloured autumn leaves, while the other in front of it has been coming out into early pink blossom.

Such are the vagaries of a NZ winter, but it has been quite a parable to me of the ways in which seasons in our own lives and in the life of churches often overlap. The autumn colours remind me of the fading glory if you like of some of the things in my life, while the blossom encourages me to look for signs of new life, of new growth within myself even in the depths of winter. And maybe it is the same for the church.

Today we enter the green season, the Sundays after Pentecost and Trinity, from where we take on with us the promise of God's Spirit inspiring and enlivening the church, and God in Trinity inviting us to share in the divine life at the eucharistic table.

We are in the long period now up until the end of November, when we focus on our discipleship as followers of Christ, our slow journey towards becoming more Christlike. For those of you who are gardeners, you could say it is our long and deep growing season, which includes the ground work we need to do at this time of year, the working on the soil, feeding and mulching, planting seeds deep in the cold ground, so that there will be flourishing in spring, and fruit in the autumn.

Today we return to our sequential journey through this year's Gospel, the Gospel of Matthew, and we come to the second block of teaching in Matthew's gospel, following on from the first block, the Sermon on the Mount, which we looked at in Epiphany.

This season is often called in the church these days **Ordinary Time**, I know some are not keen on this title, it's really meant to signify the Sundays that follow **in order**. But I like the reminder that I am called to follow Christ in the ordinariness of life, in the ordinary days of our lives, just as much as on the high days and festivals.

Over the next months, we consider our own discipleship, by watching Jesus living alongside his disciples in the ordinariness of life, teaching them, eating with them; the disciples discuss things with him, face challenges and conflict with him, and are shocked to the core by some of the things Jesus said and did, being stopped in their tracks with wonder or awe.

We will also be hearing from the Hebrew scriptures, some of the wonderful stories of how God's people journeyed with God as individuals, as families, and as a people. We'll learn from what they did well, but also probably just as much if not more from where they went wrong, and where God graciously came to their aid and rescue. Even though hundreds and thousands of years separate us from the patriarchs and matriarchs of those stories and very different cultural contexts, yet they are recognisable people to us, with the same emotions, family issues, joys and sorrows. We learn too of the faithfulness of a God who does not give up on them and indeed works with the raw materials of their lives, however much they've made a mess of them, and brings forth new possibilities, new beginnings.

It's rather lovely that today we hear the story of the visit of the mysterious 3 visitors to Abraham and Sarah, with the promise to them of the gift of a child in their old age. We see a vivid picture painted of middle eastern hospitality, still shown to travellers to this day, as I recall experiencing in the Sinai desert, when Bedouin villagers would suddenly appear and offer us tea, and then the children would appear with the trinkets they would dearly like us to buy! Here the strangers seem to morph between being at times three people and at times the Lord, which has of course in Christian interpretation over the centuries been seen as a type of the Trinity, as expressed in our icons before us. And yet they still bear the title 'The Hospitality of Abraham', taking us back to the Genesis story. I must admit to being a bit brassed off that Sarah gets clobbered quite so much about her laughter and doubting, for Abraham had expressed his own doubts to God about when the promised heir would ever turn up just a few chapters before (Gen 15:2-3).

However as the end of our reading testifies, Sarah's sceptical laughter will become the celebratory laughter of all her family and community as they rejoice in the faithfulness of God and God's mysterious way of accomplishing the promise made to Abraham and Sarah that they will be the forebears of many nations, and their people will bring blessing to all the nations of the world (Gen 12:2-3).

Matthew has introduced Jesus in his Gospel, as Jesus the Messiah, the Son of David, the Son of **Abraham** (Mt 1:1). In our Gospel today Matthew depicts Jesus as the promised Messiah, the King in the line of David, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, that indeed the kingdom of heaven has come near in Jesus himself, and that he is demonstrating that through the good news of lives healed and restored. Jesus 'had compassion' for the crowds, the splendid Greek word ἐσπλαγχνίσθη *esplanchnisthē* which we might express as 'hit in the guts', he was gutted when he saw how the crowds were 'harassed and helpless'. I was thinking about that as I saw the raw anger and grief of the crowds around the fire-devastated Grenfell Tower complex in London. Yet Jesus expressed the compassion of God, in Hebrew the *rechem*, the womb-love of God, the love of a mother for a child, just as many are trying to do in that terrible situation in London today.

We too may know times of feeling either harassed or helpless, or both! Feeling harassed and helpless is not a sign of failure but of being human!

Jesus is going to commission some disciples to join him in his ministry of showing compassion to the crowds, but do you notice that before he does that, he asks them to pray for God to send others to join them? So there will be no getting on their high horse that they are the specially chosen ones, that only they are called. Rather even before they're sent out, they are to be ready and looking out for those God will send alongside them. Only then does Jesus name the 12 who will go out now in his name and with his authority. We know the names well, but just think of what it was to hold together Peter, impetuous, acting first and thinking later, with Thomas who liked to thoughtfully work through all possible outcomes before committing himself to action. There's Matthew the tax-collector, collaborator with the Romans, alongside Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, possibly also a Zealot, whom we would call today terrorists, freedom-fighters against the Romans. And then there's James & John – nicknamed with good reason 'sons of thunder'. Parish life is a picnic compared with that lot! And that's just the men! Yet they will be sent out to do the work of Jesus in his name. Yes, at this stage only to the lost sheep of Israel, not to Gentiles or Samaritans, but we know before long a Canaanite woman (Mt 15) will challenge Jesus himself to let his vision of his calling stretch to include all nations whom God loves. Perhaps this is a reflection of the extension of vision that the community to whom Matthew was writing underwent as time went on, and they moved out from the synagogue setting into the Gentile world around.

For Jesus's disciples, for Matthew's community, it wasn't easy, as they followed their Lord who took up his cross, and called them to do the same. It was the same for St Paul and for the Christian community in Rome to whom he wrote, I remember thinking about them as I saw the Colosseum where they were persecuted and the catacombs where they were buried. Yet Paul inspires them to hold on even while suffering to the enduring anchor stones of their faith: peace with God, access to God's grace, the hope of sharing the glory of God, the love of God through the Holy Spirit, the love of Christ poured out at the cross.

One of the realities of a living, breathing church family is that like any family we have our ups and downs, our conflicts, those of us going through tough times and facing challenges. I hope this is a place where we can be honest and real with each other about how things are, that we don't have to put on a front or pretence or a brave face if we're having a hard time, but know there are those here who will support us and pray for us, pop in or make a phone-call. It's usually easier to give support than to receive it, isn't it, but may we pray for the grace to graciously receive as well - in the words of the Servant Song¹, 'pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant too.'

Augustine of Hippo was faced with a conflict in his 4th century church about those who'd lapsed under persecution and abandoned their Christian faith, should they be allowed back into the church or not? He said this, the church is **a hospital for sinners**. I think that description has a lot of wisdom. That doesn't mean we're a bunch of cot-cases, although we all might be from time to time, but rather acknowledges that we are all on a lifetime journey towards healing and wholeness, and sometimes there'll be two steps back before one step forward.

But the main thing is the direction of our discipleship. Discipleship has been called **a long obedience in the same direction** (Eugene Peterson), and we make that journey together, helping each other along.

Two final quotes from those who knew what it was to be called more sinner than saint:

Oscar Wilde: The only difference between saints and sinners is that every saint has a past, while every sinner has a future.

Robert Louis Stevenson: Saints are sinners who kept on going.

May we keep on going together, as disciples of Jesus. Amen.

¹ Servant Song (Brother, sister, let me serve you) , Richard Gillard, NZ