

St Nicholas' Anglican Church, Mordialloc, Sunday 2nd June, 2019 (Seventh Sunday of Easter)

Revd Dr Sharne Rolfe, Vicar

Readings:

Acts 16:16-34

Psalm 97

Revelation 22:12-22

John 17:20-26

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

Sermon:

Not all that long ago I was driving to the parish and pulled up at the set of traffic lights on the corner of South Rd and Nepean Hwy. My eyes were drawn to the electronic billboard there, and an advertisement for a new current affairs TV program. I couldn't now tell you the name of the program, but I haven't forgotten the slogan they were using to market it: "News without the boring bits". News without the boring bits?! Quite frankly the concept appalled me - news without the boring bits! What next? Will our world soon be encouraging us to have life without the boring bits? And what, indeed, would such a life be like?

I don't know about you, but I rather like the boring bits of things - whether we're talking about the news, a conversation, a relationship, or life itself. In my experience, its often in or during the boring bits that we really get to the true heart of the matter. And boredom can be a great motivator to be creative, to seek a new direction, even delve a little deeper to find something interesting and sustaining. Periods when we allow ourselves to be free from distractions can be times of wonderful rest and respite, an opportunity to just be in the moment. Yes, it might get a little bit boring to be

without the constant distractions our current Western world seems to rely on to keep itself entertained both day and night. But life without the boring bits? I think we'd soon be dead from stimulation overload.

In our first reading today, from Acts, there's not much of the boring bits evident at all. In fact, it's all rather full of action. Last Sunday we heard how Paul's missionary journey was unfolding, how he was traveling from town to town, sharing with small Christian communities here and there the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem, strengthening the faithful and bringing many others to faith. It's pretty action-packed; not many boring bits here in this narrative anyway. Paul has come to Macedonia, after having a vision during his sleep one night of a man calling him to do so, and at Philippi, the leading city of Macedonia, we hear of the great faith of Lydia. Today, we hear a tale of another woman, rather different one thinks to Lydia, a slave girl with a spirit of divination, who was popular with her masters because of the money she was able to make for them from fortune-telling. Paul becomes annoyed with her following them, proclaiming them as slaves of God, and he orders the spirit to come out of her, which it does. Unsurprisingly, the girl's masters are pretty annoyed in their turn about the loss of their source of revenue and have Paul and Silas brought before the magistrates, the jeering crowds joining in with their pleas to punish these "disturbers of the peace". The high action continues - Paul and Silas are stripped, flogged and put in prison. But the story doesn't end there. An earthquake comes, and Paul and Silas might easily have escaped. But instead, they remain, stopping their guard from quite literally falling on his sword, and bringing him to faith. But even that isn't the end of the story - Paul is a pretty bolshy character, even after a severe beating. He refuses to go quietly, in secret, declaring to the police: "They have beaten us in public, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us in prison; and now they are going to discharge us in secret? Certainly not! Let them come and take us out themselves." And that is indeed what happens.

I wonder how bolshy we manage to be in standing our ground against injustice? I wonder if we'd have the courage shown by Paul and Silas in challenging those who

seek a cowardly way out of their ungodly actions? And maybe that's where some of the importance of the boring bits of life come into play. Although the story we have heard of Paul in our reading today is full of action, we know that Paul's faith, his strong and bold faith, was founded on deep periods of prayer and contemplation. And some, particularly the unchurched, may scoff at prayer and contemplation as boring indeed. But as Pope Benedict XVI writes in his catechesis of the prayer life of St Paul, "Prayer is not only the soul's breath but — to use an image — it is also the oasis of peace from which we draw the water that nourishes our spiritual lives and transforms our existence." This is the personal experience St. Paul refers to in chapter 12 of the Second Letter to the Corinthians. In defending the legitimacy of his apostolate, Paul lists not the communities he founded nor the kilometres he travelled; but rather, he appeals to his relationship with the Lord, a relationship so intense that at times it was marked by moments of ecstasy and of deep contemplation (cf. 2 *Corinthians* 12:1). He boasts in what God has done in him and through him. And it is in this situation, in deep contemplation of God, that he hears God's reassuring words to him (and to us): "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (Verse 9).

Boring bits, weakness, relying on the grace of God. None of these things are what the world dangles before us, enticing us to seek. The world cries out for us to be independent and strong, to stand on our own strength. It holds up to us the false idols of a life without the boring bits. Let us instead be a people who embrace the godly life in all its nuances and challenges - the excitement, the action, but also the difficult discipline of prayer and contemplation, what for some are definitely the boring bits! God's grace is sufficient for us all. Paul understands clearly how to face and live every event of life, especially suffering, difficulty and persecution: when he experiences his own weakness, the power of God is manifested, a power that neither abandons us nor leaves us alone, but which becomes our support and strength.

In prayer, then, we open our souls to the Lord so that he might come and abide in our weakness. The Greek word St. Paul uses to describe this indwelling of the Lord in his

fragile humanity is deeply significant; he uses *episkenoo*, which literally means “to pitch his own tent”. The Lord continues to pitch his tent in us, in our midst; this is the “I in them” Jesus speaks of in our Gospel today from John. Jesus wills to abide in us, to pitch his tent in us, to enlighten and transform our lives and through that, the world. Thanks be to God.

+ In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.