

“The expanse of Christ” a sermon preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin on Sunday 28 May 2017. The texts were John 17:1-11 and Acts 1:6-14

Almighty God,
 we ask you to stretch our imaginations
 so we sense the majesty and mystery of your presence in our world,
 to give us confidence in our praying
 and hope for the future.
 through Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

Holy Name, the Catholic Church around the corner, has a person who makes small wooden crosses. Last Sunday they had about more than 100 crosses of them at worship. They were offered to students in the congregation. The students were invited to come forward, to take them and put them up in their flats or rooms. Initially one or two hesitantly came forward and then eventually all the crosses were taken.

My mind went to what would happen when they were put up in the student’s rooms, because I remember having to think about that when I was a student.

My friends did not go to church. And I struggled with how much to disclose to them. Did I want them to see the Bible sitting beside my bed when they came into the room? Would I leave it sitting on my bedside cabinet or would I keep it in the drawer?

Did I want to prompt the awkward question or the uncomfortable conversation or the behind the back comments – “Kerry has gone religious”. And if they asked me questions I was not confident about my ability to answer intelligently.

I used to have a dream that I thought was particular to me, until I learned that other ministers have it too. Of being unde-prepared. Can’t find the right clothes. Cannot get to church in time. When I get there I don’t have anything to say. Or I have lost my script, or lost a page, or I have gone to the wrong church. I have learned that many people have that dream. Students before an exam. Teachers before a class. Lawyers before a court case. Doctors before an operation. The night before, the nightmare of not having enough. Enough knowledge. Enough words. Of being under-prepared.

It was brave of those students to take a cross to put up in their room or in their flat because it might prompt a question or a conversation, and what would they say? What if they make no sense at all? What if they became embarrassed and awkward? What if they were not prepared?

Last Sunday we thought about abiding in love, in the love that flowed between the father and the son. The image of the house with many rooms, a secure place, living in Love, in God.

Today Jesus moves from words of security to words of trust.

Now we know how fickle these disciples were, how impetuous – I will never betray you, said Peter. How argumentative – which is the greatest disciple. How unreliable – they kept falling asleep.

Yet, John has Jesus saying to God,

“All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I have been glorified in them.”

I have been glorified in them.

Really?

When they argued about who was the greatest? When they fell asleep? When they denied him?

Well yes, because it was not about their glory.

A cross on a wall. A bible on the bed-side. A stumbling word. A messy church. They aren't about us!

It did not depend on those first disciples and it does not depend on us. They need to wait for power, for Holy Spirit.

If we had enough, we would not be promised Holy Spirit.

“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.”

The night-before nightmare is a reminder of the need for Holy Spirit.

But how does Holy Spirit come?

When I wondered about whether the bible would be on the bedside or in the drawer, I heard other students talking about the same things.

There were around me people who were also trying their best and sharing their struggles so I could share mine.

One of our ministers said to me once, that growing up in the church he had only ever been in a peer group of one in the church. That he had been the only church young person through all his teenage years. So he had to gain power from beyond his generation.

After last Sunday, I wonder how many of the 110 talked with each other about where they put their cross. And whether anyone had noticed it and what they had said.

How does power come? How then do we learn courage?

One way it happens is by witnessing to each other, by making faith a normal subject of conversation.

When I was a student minister, I took services at Middlemarch. I loved driving out early on a Sunday morning across those bleak ridges of bare hills and rocks. And after the service I would go to the home of a Middlemarch family. They had a tradition of dissecting the sermon or of using it as a launch-pad for conversation. It was what is called appreciative inquiry. They would talk about what happened to them during the sermon. The bits they responded to. It wasn't about agreement or disagreement, but about where it led them. This was their tradition. To talk about faith over Sunday dinner. And a solid one it was – both the tradition and the food.

Witnessing in Judea includes witnessing at home. We learn to witness by witnessing to each other, by giving it a go.

This Sunday is the Sunday after Ascension and it is the last Sunday of the season of Easter. Next Sunday is Pentecost.

Since Easter we have been telling the resurrection story. Resurrection was like an explosion that burst out, rippled around. What seemed dead at crucifixion, broke through one barrier after another.

So much so, the early followers said that Jesus stands above and beyond division, drawing people across barriers. The person of Jesus affects people beyond his own culture, his own language, his own kind.

If a tomb cannot constrain him, neither can a particular language, or a particular culture or a particular nation or a particular church

We have not always believed that. We have acted as if some cultures were better than others at witnessing to Christ, notably the British.

The ascension proclaims that Christ is above the constraints of culture, yet is at home within every culture, and cannot be restricted to any particular expression of Christ. So I have called the sermon the expanse of Jesus.

We witness to Jesus by attending to his expanse, trying to name the ripple of resurrection we experience.

Witness has to be personal. We cannot be anonymous witnesses. We cannot contract out witness. We cannot delegate it to the minister or some other person in the church.

Resurrection ripples into each of our lives, affects each follower. Which is partly what ascension is about. Ascending beyond our capacity to lock Christ out.

But more than that, rippling into every realm of existence, beyond our personal story.

The ascended Christ.

“Christ is the love incarnate that casts out fear,” writes Nels Ferré. “As sure as Christ is Christ, a real Christian breaks down barriers among groups at home, among the churches, in the communities, and to the ends of the earth.”

I wonder what for you might be the cross on the wall or the bible on the bedside, the small sign that you have been affected by resurrection.

Perhaps you were filmed in the ANZ Bank during a recent protest. Or you spoke up for refugees, and someone asked you why. Or you questioned a sexist comment. Or you asked a friend who had stopped coming to church, gently, about their faith.

At that moment know, others who have done the same, faced the same doubt, experienced the same nightmare, and precisely then is the promise of Holy Spirit.

Risk making a mistake. Struggle beyond your sense of not knowing enough or saying it right.

“you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

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*growing in courage to live the Jesus way*



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