

**“Being with” a sermon relating to Matthew 23:1-12 preached at Knox Church  
Dunedin New Zealand on 1 November 2020 by Kerry Enright**

Let me begin by speaking about Presbyterian Support Otago of which I am a Board member.

I want to thank many of you for your financial support. We have many causes that seek our giving and it's not easy choosing. By your giving, you provide services like a listening ear and helpful skills to families working through challenges. Many of us know how tough those challenges can be and have been grateful for the help we have received, so it is good to pass it on. Thank you too to those who week by week, put non-perishable gifts in the boxes at the back of the church for the foodbank. Recently when I took in our gifts, I noticed two people walking out with bags of basic necessities. How hard it is when money runs out. After COVID that need has grown. And thank you to those people who are part of the buddy programme. I know a young couple in Central Otago who regularly host a young person, just to be with that person, and in the process they learn about the challenges families face. Their compassion grows with understanding as they become involved in a person's life. And thank you to those who purchase plants at Youth Grow. We have found it a great source of plants for our garden. And there is much more. There is material at the back of the church and if you would like to know more, I am always available.

Now I turn to the theme of service, evident in the reading today. This unusual year we learned to live in a bubble, to live exclusively with people with whom we normally lived or who came to be with us. For some of us it was a gift, for some of us it was a challenge, and perhaps for most of us it was a mix of the two. During a pandemic, living in a bubble makes sense. Outside a pandemic, bubbles are problems. Feeling isolated is a major ailment in our society. Whereas connectedness is a major contributor to health, social ills grow when people feel unconnected. Now in a way, we live in bubbles all the time. We all have a limited range of contacts. We all spend more time with some people than others. And over time those connections develop a pattern.

In an unequal society, for example, the gaps between socio-economic groups can become chasms, societies divide, communities fracture, the glue that holds us together dissolves. Then bigger problems arise. Such gaps thwart us growing into full human beings and becoming a flourishing community. For a while I served a central city church in a provincial city. By its history and its place in the city, that church reached across the city's divides, and so as its minister did I. I became conscious that there were circles of people. In one circle I would keep coming across

much the same people again and again. Then in another circle I came across another group of people, again and again. And then in another circle, another group people, again and again. But I noticed that few people went between the circles. People stayed within their circle and had little experience of living outside it.

Many of our faith stories are about achieving a flourishing life, the danger of bubbles and the importance of bridging divides. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, a person reaches across the chasm of a long history of animosity. In the parable of the Lazarus and the rich man, the chasm became unbridgeable. The gospel is about bridging chasms. How do we be part of its movement?

I want to use ideas from Sam Wells, vicar of St Martins in the Fields in Trafalgar Square in London. St Martin's is confronted by chasms. It is known for its heritage of music. And on its doorstep sleep people who are homeless. Wells says that the most important word for our time and the most important theological word of our time is the word "with". Let's explore that.

Wells asks us to imagine someone who is homeless. Some people will see before them a personal tragedy, perhaps someone has so struggled with an addiction that they have used up their money. Some people will imagine they have come late to a crime-scene, perhaps the person is the victim of abuse, so that living outside is preferable to being unsafe inside. Some people will see a public policy failure, perhaps a person's skills are no longer needed, or no low-cost housing is available. Some people will see a person making a choice, someone choosing to live without a home as a lifestyle choice. Some people might even blame the person for the situation in which they find themselves. Beyond the lens we use, beyond the framework we bring, is the person themselves with their own story. Wells invites us to avoid squeezing their story into our view of the world or our approach to homelessness. We're invited instead to treat the person as their own person with their own story.

Wells says there are four ways we can respond to seeing someone homeless. We might say ... "We need to get people off the streets into housing, employment, a profitable use of their time." So we may be energised to join the board of a night shelter or to take the person some food or provide some clothing. If we have professional skills, we might seek to help them professionally. Wells calls that approach, **working for**, intervening to act on behalf of a person who is homeless. The second option is to speak to the person who is homeless, to explore the reasons they are homeless, to help them know what resources are available for them. Wells calls this approach, **working with**, an action that is taken in partnership with the person who is homeless. The third option is simply to sit down beside the person

who is homeless, to pass the time of day with them – share first names, talk about where they are from, ask what it is like to spend a day or night outside. Wells calls this approach, **being with** someone, having a genuine encounter. The fourth option is to feel rising anger about the fact that there are homeless people at all, to discourage people from speaking about “the homeless”, to critique assumptions about mental health or any stereotype we might use. Wells calls this approach, **being for** someone, not encountering the person but acting for them.

There is a place for each approach. Each has its value. One in particular names a primary way God is, **being with**. Emmanuel – God with us. God being with us and we being with people is a core way of our being that informs and animates the other dimensions of how we engage. In a world of isolation and dislocation and disconnection, being with is a call on us as a congregation. That is a challenge to any central city congregation with our diversity and with opportunity on our doorstep. I wonder how we can partner Presbyterian Support in a way that helps us to be with others. Support might attend to all the aspects I have named, but none can replace the call on us to be with others.

We weren't made to live in bubbles, in individual bubbles, in socio-economic bubbles, in church bubbles. The impulse of the gospel is to bridge chasms, to cross divides, to reach across, to be with another. There is an invitation here.

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