

A radical idea of worship and a radical idea of community.

A reflection by Geoff Wraight. Westgate Baptist Community 21 Aug 2005.

Romans 12: 1-8

.....Sisters and brothers, in light of all the generous breaks God has given you, I urge you to offer in return the only thing you have that comes within cooee being enough: your whole selves, bodies and all. Hand them over to God as the ultimate offering; the living gift of all you are and all you do. Dedicate your lives wholly and solely to God, for this is the nature of true worship and is the only sacrifice God is looking for.

.....Do not model your life on the usual aspirations of the world around you. Instead, allow God to completely remodel your life. This will start with changing the way you think, so that you will be able to tune in to what God wants, which of course is always what is good and worthwhile and for the best.

.....As one who knows what it means to be treated far better than I deserve, I would warn you not to go getting over-inflated opinions of yourselves. Take a good hard look at yourselves, and be realistic about what you can and can't do with the gifts and faith God has given you. You are all different, and there is no point in measuring yourselves against each other. It would be like expecting all the different parts of your body to be able to do each other's jobs. How ever many of us there are, together we are all one body in Christ. As different parts of the body, we belong to one another and need one another, but we are not the same as one another. In the generosity of God, we have been given to one another, each with our own job to do and the unique gift needed to do it. And so just as a human body works best when each part is doing what it was designed to do, so too the body we all belong to works best when everybody faithfully exercises the gift they have been given: the prophets proclaim the message they trust; the ministers perform their ministries; the teachers do the teaching; the encouragers spur others on; the resource people share what they have with uncomplicated generosity; the advocates are spirited in their defense of the community; and the aid-workers carry out their acts of mercy with warmth and good cheer.

Faith is a private matter. Religion is a personal thing that one participates in by choice and practices in the privacy of one's home or local religious sanctuary. The church is for the benefit of its members and should keep to its purpose of religious services and giving help to those who need to have some kind of faith.

The church should keep its nose out of politics and visa versa – except when certain ideas of “family values” are in keeping with the Government's policies or when a lot of voters from marginal seats attend a mega church conference in the affluent suburbs of Sydney.

At least this is what certain current Federal politicians in Australia might have us believe.

It is of course in keeping with an enormous re-emergence of individualism that has become a driving force in the shaping of our society in the last decade or so in Australia.

By this I mean the idea of the individual being the most important entity in our concept of society. That we all need to be basically out to better ourselves and our own personal interests and wealth and that the sum of the individuals will then equal a healthy society.

The implication of this of course, is that the more personal wealth and personal success you have the more you contribute to the economy and the better our society becomes.

Unfortunately, this idea that the more you have or the more you earn, the better you are and the more you spend the greater your contribution, leaves those who can't spend and who are not able to progress the wealth ladder as non-entities in this system.

Dr. James Macklin, a catholic barrister was speaking about this in a radio interview this week discussing the proposed changes to our industrial relations laws. He talked about the problem of economism in our society.

Economism is the social philosophy that measures the value of people solely according to their economic purpose. You've got economism measured by such extraordinary comments on work as calling workers a 'human resource'. That's all economism refers to workers as, it's a 'human resource'. And years ago, in order to boost the philosophy of economism, most American corporations - and, later on, Australian companies and British companies - adopted that view: instead of 'employee relations', or 'workplace relations', they're now 'human resource managers'. And therefore, workers are meant to see themselves as nothing other than a resource of the corporation.

So I am pleased to report that.. Our Diaconate appointed a human resource sub-committee that determined a favourable cost/benefit analysis of investing in a youth pastoral resource. At the end of the financial year the benefits will be weighed against our pastoral profit forecasts and, given our youth pastoral resource is contributing to the overall pastoral profit bottom line measured in teenagers per church service per month on an weighted average adjusted for the spiritual price index, – we will recommend an extension of the current resource allocation. Oh, and by the way – her name is Stacey!

I am not wanting to make fun of economics or of business in general but what I want to suggest is that Pauls' vision of faith and community in Romans 12 stands in radical contrast to some the de-humanising and individualistic trends in our world today...Perhaps expressed particularly in our consumer driven society where the reality of greed tends cause wealth to trickle up rather than down..

I want to make just two observations:

Paul's vision of the church presents **a radical idea of worship and a radical idea of community.**

1. A radical idea of worship.

Paul's idea of worship is not about a person expressing their devotion by singing songs and saying prayers once a week in a church service and then making sure their practice of religion remains private and does not interfere with the business of work and state.

No, what does he say... Sisters and brothers, in light of all the generous breaks God has given you, I urge you to offer in return the only thing you have that comes within cooee being enough: **your whole selves, bodies and all. Hand them over to God as the ultimate offering; the living gift of all you are and all you do. Dedicate your lives wholly and solely to God, for this is the nature of true worship and is the only sacrifice God is looking for.**
**Do not model your life on the usual aspirations of the world around you.** Instead, allow God to completely remodel your life. This will start with changing the way you think, so that you will be able to tune in to what God wants, which of course is always what is good and worthwhile and for the best.

Hmm.. I think this involves a little more than just a bit of private spiritual devotion...

To offer our whole-selves, bodies and all is about our faith in Jesus radically expressing itself in every area of our lives. It means practicing faith in what we do with our bodies and what we do with our time and what we do with our food and what we do with our money. And what we do with our politics and what we do with our minds and what we do with our education.

It is about being fully engaged with the world around us but deliberately not fitting in with the usual rules and values – especially when they go against God's values. It is the exact opposite of a privatized, separated religious life...

Cardinal George Pell and Archbishop Peter Jensen are two church leaders that I confess I may sometimes disagree with. But out of a concern for the values of the common good and the basic rights of a human being not to be exploited by another - they have expressed strong reservations about some of the proposed changes to our workplace laws. In this I think, they are offering their whole selves as a sacrifice to God...

I think Paul's idea of a living sacrifice here is related also to what we have talked about here before as the "practices of the Christian faith". A way to live that is real, radical and practical.

2. A radical idea of Community

As one who knows what it means to be treated far better than I deserve, I would warn you not to go getting over-inflated opinions of yourselves. Take a good hard look at yourselves, and be realistic about what you can and can't do with the gifts and faith God has given you. You are all different, and there is no point in measuring yourselves against each other. It would be like expecting all the different parts of your body to be able to do each other's jobs. However many of us there are, together we are all one body in Christ. As different parts of the body, we belong to one another and need one another, but we are not the same as one another. In the generosity of God, we have been given to one another, each with our own job to do and the unique gift needed to do it. And so just as a human body works best when each part is doing what it was designed to do, so too the body we all belong to works best when everybody faithfully exercises the gift they have been given: the prophets proclaim the message they trust; the ministers perform their ministries; the teachers do the teaching; the encouragers spur others on; the resource people share what they have with uncomplicated generosity; the advocates are spirited in their defense of the community; and the aid-workers carry out their acts of mercy with warmth and good cheer.

What is radical about this vision of community?

I think it is found in two complementary ideas.

That each part of the body is unique and is equally important and valued for who they are... and

.... that the common purpose of the community is the most important goal.

When we think of the body picture of the church the Paul loves to use we often talk about it in terms of the importance of each part of the body doing its bit and helping each other and of realizing that we can't do without each other...

And this is true and radical in the sense that we are being called in the Christian community to be a miniature picture if you like of God's vision of whole humanity for every individual.

In contrast to the competitive individualism of the world around us we are to be a place where each person is valued for who they are not how much they contribute on an economic scale.

But the other dimension to this picture that is radical is that it is the body as a whole that takes on its identity. We know that we are our bodies that we cannot separate ourselves or our minds or our personality from the body that we have. In the same way, the Christian community takes on a life of its own – that becomes an expression of Christ to the world that can only be real when we understand our life together as an expression of God's love and life.

This is both a mystery and a practical reality.

So in conclusion, if what we are on about here, if what Stacey and I and each of us who names this community as our own is on about, is the forming of young people in the radical idea of worship and community as Paul describes it... Then I can think of no more important mission.

My prayer is that engaged faith tradition of Westgate will inform and shape the growing faith of our young people and that both in mind and in practice "you will be able to tune in to what God wants, which of course is always what is good and worthwhile and for the best."