

THE CHALLENGE OF LIVING OUT OUR FAITH IN OUR COMMUNITIES

Reading from Philip Yancey's book, "Finding God in Unexpected Places" (pages 169-170), under the title "The Surprise of Faith." He Writes:

Once, our Church back in Chicago faced something of a crisis. The pastor had left, attendance was flagging, a community outreach program now seemed threatened. The leadership suggested an all-night vigil of prayer.

Several people raised questions. Was it safe, given our inner-city neighbourhood? Should we hire guards or escorts for the parking lot? What if no one showed up? At length we discussed the logistics and the practicality of such an event. Nevertheless, the night of prayer was scheduled.

To my surprise the poorest members of the Congregation, a group of senior citizens from a housing project, were the ones who responded most enthusiastically to the prayer vigil. I could not help wondering how many of their prayers had gone unanswered over the years – they lived in the projects, after all, amid crime, poverty, and suffering – yet still they showed a childlike trust in the power of prayer. 'How long do you want to stay – an hour or two?' we asked, thinking of the logistics of van shuttles, 'Oh, we'll stay all night,' they replied.

One black woman in her nineties, who walks with a cane and can barely see, explained to a staff member why she wanted to spend the night sitting on the hard pews of a church in an unsafe neighbourhood. 'You see, there's lots of things we can't do in this church. We ain't so educated, and we ain't got as much energy as some of you younger folks. But we can pray. We got time, and we got faith. Some of us don't sleep much anyway. We can pray all night if needs be.'

And so they did. Meanwhile, a bunch of yuppies in a downtown church learned anew a lesson of faith from the Gospels: Faith appears where least expected and falters where it should be thriving.

As people of faith gave their time to an all night prayer vigil, the elders of the church were challenged in their own faith. We are also being challenged in our own situations as to how and where we can best use our gifts.

Sometimes it can be very difficult to know what the consequences will be when we make choices. We may have the best of intentions, and yet things turn out differently than we might have planned. When we walk hand in hand with God, who knows what can happen! Strength to continue comes from trusting that God accompanies us on our chosen journeys.

Today's reading from Genesis has many heroes, all of them working together with God to carry on God's promise. Yet, clearly the story belongs to Rebekah, and her decision to respond to God's call to venture to an unknown land and an unfamiliar people.

Abraham sends his servant off to find a wife for Isaac from among Abraham's people. So Eliezer the servant goes in search of a suitable partner. He prays about the important task he has undertaken and shares with God his plan: he will ask for a drink of water from the well where he has stopped. If the woman shows kindness by giving him a drink and also shows sensitivity to the thirst of the camels and gives them water, she would be a good wife. Along comes Rebekah who, through her generous actions, fits the bill perfectly. Eliezer immediately gives her some gifts and accompanies her to her home.

Today's reading begins with Eliezer telling his story to Rebekah's family. The servant recounts the history of Abraham and Sarah, his prayer, and why he thinks Rebekah is the woman God has chosen for Isaac.

The challenge which was given to Eliezer is given to us in another way. As we have been given by our extravagantly hospitable God, so we are to give in return. We are all asked to walk hand in hand with God and by doing this we will gain his blessing.

We are all called upon to make decisions. However for most of us we are far too rational. We weigh things too much. We consider the possible results of the alternatives and then find enough to scare us out of making any choice at all. There are risks that go with decision making, and risks are too hard for those of us who think too much. The really important decisions in many instances have to be made on the spot, in faith and trust.

While we cannot control the consequences of our actions, we can trust God to lead us and guide us.

This sense of guidance comes through in the Gospel reading. Jesus is frustrated and angry with people who never seem satisfied. They didn't like John the Baptist's approach – too austere, and they didn't like that of Jesus – too flamboyant. Jesus offers a couple of harsh retorts and he then offers a contemporary proverb, “wisdom is vindicated by her deeds” – in other words, “the proof is in the pudding.”

Jesus then further appeals to his audience with a very practical invitation. “Take the yoke I give you. Put it on your shoulders and learn from me. I am gentle and humble, and you will find rest. This yoke is easy to bear, and this burden is light.” While the specific consequences of following Jesus are not made clear, the overall picture is that Jesus is a gentle taskmaster, compassionate and patient. People are invited to draw their own conclusions, to make their own decisions.

The choice seems clear. Following Jesus is not smooth sailing – there is tension, struggle, pain, and difficulty. Yet, when we choose to walk hand in hand with Christ, we find strength and sustenance for our journey.

Jesus reassures the disciples in the face of tensions and struggles. Jesus extends the hospitality of a yoke, an invitation and a promise to walk alongside them through life's journeys.

Only after decisions are made do we have any sense as to whether we have chosen as we should. Inaction or the refusal to decide doesn't provide any escape from the tensions we face when decisions have to be made. For all we know not to decide is to decide! Not to decide is to let time decide for us.

Where should we be today as a church community in this place? We are being challenged to reach across the boundaries out into our community? What are some of the ways through which we could serve?

If we look for signs of God at work, they're all around, and they give us hope that the church will move ahead. Our best days are still ahead!

As members of the Bathurst Uniting Church the Congregation is reaching out into the community through:

- ❖ For the past two years offering a safe shelter for the homeless within the community over the winter months. This has not been possible this year due to the COVID 19 pandemic.
- ❖ As a result of the above situation, hot meals are been provided from one of the Church Halls over lunchtime on Saturdays and Sundays. These meals are available to anyone in need.
- ❖ Leading 3 active groups serving the young people and youth in the church. A play group for the very young; a kids group for infants and primary children; a youth group for high school children.
- ❖ Ministering to those in Nursing Homes through pastoral visits and providing worship services.
- ❖ Members being actively involved in the Bathurst Refugee Support Group providing friendship and assistance to refugees and asylum seekers within our community.

What challenges will we encounter as we follow the living out of our faith in our community today? Let us be prepared to listen more, to meet others on their terms as we reach out to those outside the church.

What can we do to make sure our relationships and other endeavours turn out for the best? We can't guarantee such an outcome. However, as we choose to live in relationship with God and journey in God's ways, we can be assured that God will be with us wherever life beckons.

When have you sensed God journeying alongside you?

In what ways do you – as an individual and a church – express your chosen journey as one that is yoked with Christ?

How can we cooperate with God's ongoing work of creation?

Today, at this time, we too, are called upon to act. We too, are called to live out dreams and to follow visions.

Let us reflect on the story of the poorest members of Philip Yancey's church in Chicago responding to the call for an all night prayer vigil. Where might we be called? What can we do? Every person has something to offer, even the elderly, the busy, the tired and the poor. Let us learn from those senior citizens who were the poorest members of the congregation. They knew they had something to offer and were prepared to take a leap of faith to stay all night at the prayer vigil.

Like people before us, we are required to make some leaps of faith, to daringly step out and attempt the great, and sometimes seemingly terrible, things we believe God has called us to do.

We cannot wait for certainty and the assurance that everything will work out like we would like it to.

We must take risks if we are to live out our dreams. We must be ready to bet our lives on visions. And even if we appear to others to be like Don Quixote, we must dream the impossible dream, so that God's promise will be fulfilled.

Amen.

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus Christ,
Help us to follow and find you in our communities today

In the places where we work,
In the places where we shop,
In the places where we relax,
In the places where we eat.

Take us as disciples of your kingdom
To see through your eyes
And hear the questions you are asking,

To welcome all with your trust and truth,
And to change the things that contradict god's love

By the power of your cross
And the freedom of your spirit. Amen.