

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 11 Year B 2018

Some of you might remember that a significant part of my adult working life was living and working in a Christian community in Hobart for people with intellectual disabilities. It was a big part of my life - nearly ten years. As part of our spiritual formation, once a month a group of us would go and visit an old lady who lived some blocks away. She had been instrumental in the founding of the community some years before. She was very old by the time I knew her and completely blind. She lived alone, and her life and spiritual disposition was really shaped by her Quakerism - the Quakers being one of the very early non-conformist brands of Christian religion from the 17th century with an emphasis on silence, simplicity and pacifism.

When our little group would visit Margaret in her small living room, we would sit on assorted chairs around a candle and for perhaps half an hour or so sit in silence. A Quaker Sunday service is marked by silence. No hymns or readings but if the Spirit moves, someone will speak. After the time of silence Margaret would speak and as a young man I was impressed by her depth and spiritual wisdom and gentleness and her love of the world and of humanity. But she had a kind of motto, a little saying she clearly lived by and I suppose it was her hope we might live by it too: *dwell deep; lift up. Dwell deep; lift up.*

The beauty of old Margaret's little saying is of course that it is at once so simple *and* incredibly profound. And it gives perfect expression to so much of what we seek to live and experience in the spiritual life. It is worth remembering that in western culture - the civilization we have inherited and still benefit from - that so many of the achievements we can lay claim to sprung from those institutions which *did* encourage the life lived both deeply and life that looked upward. The powerhouses of Europe for 1000 years were its monasteries and convents: centres of prayer, yes, but also art, learning, exploration and charity. So much of what we take for granted in the West was born from those communities of men and women who dedicated the whole of their lives to dwelling deep and lifting up. We might even say that some of the very best, the most noble and the most beautiful achievements of the human endeavour has sprung from that context.

It is perhaps, then, the great tragedy of our age that *so little* of our culture is directed toward fostering or encouraging either of these two directions - either dwelling deep or lifting up. Competition: yes. Innovation: yes. Novel experiences: yes. Material comfort: yes. Fun, pleasure, having a 'good time': a resounding yes! All *these* we value. All these we can find time and money and effort to support and encourage and celebrate and foster. But dwelling deep and lifting up has, for our age, little attraction, little pulling power. The most sophisticated depth we seem to manage in public discourse is what people *feel*. I doubt feelings are enough, really. The listlessness of so many of our young is, I suspect, a symptom of this - compounded by the constant distraction with novelty, fad, excitement, technology.

We want, deep down - all of us - to commit to something true and wonderful and beautiful. But there are so few opportunities to make this happen. And so, for many, an existence just lived on the surface, just skimming the top. We have been sold the lie that the life worthy of celebration (in fact, the only kind of life on offer...) is the life that just settles on the surface.

The profound truth that who and what we *really are* is found by dwelling deep and lifting up, is suggested to us in the Gospel today. That dynamic - the movement - of going deep and moving upward is the same hidden and irrepressible force of the tree spreading out its roots in the earth and its branches stretching out toward the sky. Now, the exquisite little parable of mustard seed is often read as parable on *personal* faith, and on personal growth, individual spirituality. But as for almost all the parables of Jesus, it is not the *individual* that is Jesus' concern, but *the Kingdom: what can we say the kingdom of God is like?* The principles are, of course, readily applied to both the collective and the individual. And for both the parable that comes before (the parable of the seed growing secretly) and the parable of the mustard seed, the issue is the same: the *apparent insignificance* of the Kingdom. The seed grows hidden; the mustard seed is so, so very small. On the surface of things nothing is happening, there is nothing much to see here.

And remain on the surface of things nothing will happen! Fail to plant the seed, it will not grow! Now, the Gospel writer Mark writes for a church that is small and fragile. It is persecuted and has been rejected by its parent Judaism. It would have seemed for those early Christians that even if what they believed they new to be true, it was also irrelevant to most others. On the surface of things, they would remain small, hidden and obscure. But the true nature of the Kingdom, as Jesus shows, is seen in its dwelling deep and lifting up.

Now, mustard seeds don't grow into trees but shrubs/bushes. And they are not the tallest. But they *do* grow vigorously; they can take over gardens. And birds shelter in their shade. This part of the image - of the gathering birds taking shade in the branches - finds such ready resonances in the reading from Ezekiel: the great cedar tree on the mountain top that will draw to it *every kind of bird, every winged creature*. Mark, then surely seeing in this an image of *hope*: that all people from all nations *will* come, *will* shelter in the Kingdom, *will* shelter in the Tree of the Cross. Jesus offering, then, reassurance to those who might be dismayed by what appears to be an unimpressive beginning: don't look to the surface of things. It doesn't tell the whole story!

Looking to the surface of things, it might appear *our* presence in the scheme of things as a small, fragile community also dooms *us* to be hidden, obscure. But the faith *we* hold on to is the *same* faith as those Christians Mark was writing to. We would do well to remember the many lives, the many souls *already* touched by the faithful witness of this place and its people. And God may very well have a greater, more marvellous future for us here. If we want the branches of our part of God's Kingdom to spread out and offer shade and comfort, then we must also - personally and communally - dwell deep and lift up. Finding nourishment in the word and sacrament; being faithful to the church's teachings and the apostolic witness; drawing from all those things which have nourished and supported the Kingdom down through the ages. We don't have to find new answers or new solutions. It's already all there!

But importantly, *this* church, *our* community, is remarkably equipped to facilitate the urgent need of our time to lift up and to dwell deep. Surely this can be *our* distinct mission. We inherit and value here a theological and spiritual and artistic heritage that loans itself so perfectly to this vision. When people ask us, *what is All Saints? What do they do? Who are they?* perhaps we can learn to say, not so much *we have a pretty building* or *we have lovely music* or *we like traditional worship*, even if all these help and are important. But often these are said as if they were ends in themselves. Perhaps, then, we could add, *we help people dwell deep. We are a community that lifts up.* Maybe *this* can be the way we start to reimagine ourselves and our distinct mission. We can show that in our branches *we are not* doomed to live on the surface of things. We can show what an abundant, fully alive life looks like. Amen.