

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 13 Year A 2017

You can often tell something of what is important to individuals and families - what their priorities are - by the way they order and decorate their homes. What we position in places of prominence will say something of our values. What is obvious and catches the attention, the arrangement of furniture communicates something of what is important to us. In some homes, the obvious centre is the kitchen table. Many homes will have a gallery of photo frames, on a bookcase or mantle shelf. Nowadays actually, bookcases have all but disappeared from most people's homes. Instead shelving for video games and DVDs. With the demise of DVDs I suppose soon just empty wall space.

Of course, in the public space of most people's homes, the most commanding, dominating piece of furniture is the TV. Most furniture in the principal living space is directed toward the ubiquitous black screen. I was in a home just this past week in which the only room with a view was ignored. The furniture was arranged to turn its back on the view and face, yes, the TV mounted on the wall. In most homes, the TV is the family shrine, the object of revered devotion, before which our hearts and minds are formed; before which a hushed silence must be observed. But imagine for a moment if in our homes - the homes of all Christians - the natural focus of our living rooms was not the TV but a real shrine, with a cross and icons and other holy images, with lighted lamps before which prayers are said. And an open bible. A bible that is actually read. Not the confirmation bible still in its white box and tissue paper. But one battered and worn, with rough edges, the signs of use, the sign that this was central to our lives.

Perhaps naïve and simplistic, but I imagine that if such a shrine was the proper focus of all our families, then our church would be in much better, more robust state. Of course, these things as mere decoration would mean nothing. But as a reflection, a sign of our *priorities*, of what is truly important to us, of what forms and shapes our values, they could be tools that could revolutionise our church! If we wish to grow our church, strengthen our church, if we wish our church to have a vital, energised future, it will come by your prayers! Yes, prayers in this place. But more importantly, and more critically, prayers in your home. It really shouldn't be so unusual that for Christians a cross, a bible, a holy image might be the natural focus of our homes. And as the natural focus of our homes setting out clearly for us - and those around us - what our priorities are.

Our Lord today is rather unambiguous about priorities today. *Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; whoever does not take up his cross and follow me is not worth of me.* If you are looking for a tolerant, lenient, easy going, relaxed, anything-goes kind of Jesus, you will not find him here. *That* Jesus is a pure invention and not based on the gospels, the only record we have of him. Yes, the Jesus we confess and trust is the Lord of love and forgiveness. But even as he loves us he makes demands of us. At times, difficult demands which can only be met by his grace and goodness. There is a costliness to following the Lord Jesus, to being his disciple. As Paul reminds us in Romans today, the life we have in Christ comes by his death. Grace doesn't come cheaply.

The priority Christ ought to have in the life of the believer is most confronting when faced with the possibility of conflict within the family; an allegiance to Christ over father or mother or son or daughter. Again, the evangelist Matthew writes from a situation in which this is already reality, in which families have been shaken by

members setting Christ as their priority. In both the Jewish and Greco-Roman world whatever religion the head of the household held, was then held by the entire household. To choose Christ when the rest of one's family did not, had serious personal, social, political and economic consequences. It is no accident, then, that the early church came to be regarded by many as a new family. The force of this is perhaps diminished in our context. We are used to rebellious children. We kind of even expect it. We are even used to parents who wander off and do their own thing. And, as I've said before, we celebrate independence and free choice. Choosing, however to wholeheartedly follow Christ might be one of the choices that goes too far... But if Christ is our priority, if we seek to order our lives to him and the faith he imparts, we will be out of step, we will walk to different beat, our lives will bear the imprint of another world!

The most basic sign that we are setting Christ as our priority will be in our commitment to Sunday worship. Now, folk in the church never seem to tire in lamenting how much the observance of Sundays has changed, and it is because Sundays have changed that the church is in such a sorry state. But it has not been Sunday trading or sports on Sundays or working on Sundays that has led people from the faith. These things are but a symptom, not the cause. The cause of so many folk walking away from the worshipping life of the church was that mostly the faith never completely took hold. The reason why so many have given up on the faith is that they were not fully converted to the faith. If it simply takes a game of football or the opportunity to spend more money or even make more money, then Christ has not become the priority.

For the first believers, Sunday was not a rest day. There was no such things as a weekend in the ancient world. The early Christians who were not also Jewish did not observe the sabbath rest. And this fell from Christian usage when the church decisively split from the Synagogue in the last quarter of the first century. Yes, the early Christians observed the Lord's Day as we do. But that was a working day as every other. This meant they gathered before dawn – *before* the working day - for their Sunday assemblies. And in some places, met again after dusk, at the end of their working day. In other words, *they knew their priorities*. Because no other act gives more profound expression to the central Christian beliefs – the resurrection of Christ from the dead – than the Sunday which celebrates this. Sunday worship needs to be a priority for us because it expresses the priority of resurrection faith. If we cannot order our lives even to this most basic and most central aspect of our faith, the rest is unlikely to follow.

I know that our lives are busy and we are all pulled in many directions. I also know many of you make extraordinary efforts to be here each week. And yes, there are commitments to be met, work that has to be done, obligations that need to be fulfilled. But these ought not diminish or compromise the central priority of meeting on the Lord's Day. Those who cannot be faithful in a little cannot be faithful in a lot. If we only bear witness to our faith when it is convenient or because nothing else has got in the way, we will not have the faith that will endure. To say yes to Christ of course means to say no to other things, even if that is difficult, even if makes us odd or unpopular. If Jesus is Lord, other things cannot be permitted to rule us. But the gospel of Jesus Christ is good news! Jesus comes to offer us abundant life! Not just an Ok life. Not just a reasonable life. Not just a life in which we struggle and survive. No. Abundant life. The gospel today reminds us of the blessings that come from faith. And so, Christ needs to be our priority. Christ wants all of us. Not just bits of us so we can enjoy the fullness of life he offers! Amen.