Sermon

Pentecost X

18/8/19

Eltham

Planned Giving III 2019

**Readings**

Isaiah 61:10-62:3

Ps 113

Galatians 4:4-7

Luke 2:1-7

+FSHS

First week the message in relation to our giving was about our complete dependency on God, that all that we are and have comes from God and returns to God, passing through our hands not to be grasped but stewarded. Last week the clear message to us about our giving is this: what do we need to give in order to look expectantly towards, work towards, and be prepared for the coming realm of God, for meeting Jesus where we find him gone before us in our world? Is this our chief treasure, seeking the realm of God?

This week we celebrate Mary, Mother of the Lord. Mary’s “yes” with her whole being. Not a “maybe”, or a reluctant “yes”. A “yes” that she had no idea what she was signing up for, maybe. But it’s an expression above all of trust: an as yet unmarried young woman, pregnant in a time and age when this was worse than disgrace, and could mean death. Mary had to trust that “the power of the most high” would overshadow her with protection, like a hovering mother bird.

How do we say “yes” to complete dependency on God? How do we say “yes” to trusting God completely to look after us? I think most of us, myself included, want to piously (and sincerely) affirm that we trust in God. But actually trusting God is a different thing altogether. Obedience is one thing, acceptance and trust that this direction is a path God is walking with us is another thing. We have enormous capacity for self-deception… fear leads us to a need to control, to be in control. Fear over our future, over a state of mind or health, over the potential of losing a job or a significant negative health diagnosis. We go into organization mode: “Right! How can I claim back control?” Sometimes that process is important – being able to be an agent, to have agency to make a choice, this is empowerment, and one of the greatest things we can do for those who are dispossessed, disadvantaged, oppressed, is to share agency with them. But the flip side of this is where we start to worry, where anxiety and fear drive us to such a point that we have to control a situation and will do anything to exert control. Fear and the need to control drives all sorts of whacky behaviours: whether that’s driving an agenda, making a personal fiefdom in a community organization, [other stuff here] bullying and harassment, exclusion and discrimination, gossip and slander, or anything up to murder; or in a larger sense, such things as the xenophobia which drives policies which strand asylum seekers and refugees on Pacific islands, or the latent patriarchalism which underpins domestic violence and violence against women.

Mary’s “yes” signals consent to the presence of God within her, in her very body, and in her whole life. There’s no room for fear in that yes. She’s a model for us of cooperation and co-creation with God our creator, whose desire it is that we too carry the Word of God to and for the world. We will best do that when our trust is at its fullest, when we cede control of our lives to the one who holds us gently and who will not let us fall. When we let go of the need to control, we are free, able to live as the free children of God.

Our “yes” to God means that instead of our eyes being turned on ourselves, they are always on Jesus, and that we evaluate our lives and our situations in conversation with him. Our “yes” to God, is yes to God operating in and through the gifts God’s given us to bring about God’s purposes for us and for the world: it’s yes to God working through us as we clean toilets, as we look after grandchildren, as we go shopping for a neighbor, as we care tenderly for God’s creation, as we do our computer analyst work, as we help someone to learn English, as we make beanies for the Mission to Seafarers or Anglicare, as we write and preach a sermon, as we bake scones for a function, as we get up and go to our work whether paid or voluntary, as we sit in contemplative prayer in silent darkness. It’s yes to God in each and every moment of our lives, and in the way we steward our time and resources. That is to say, when it comes to asking the question of “what is God asking of me?” the answer is “my all and my everything”. And it’s from there we work out what we give and how and what.

In the coming two years we’re hoping to have a full time assistant curate. I’m beginning the process of talking to those about to be ordained deacon in February, and I’d value your prayers for discernment as I speak to potential candidates. We’re hoping whoever is appointed will bring fresh gifts and a different perspective, and will assist me in pastoral care, as well as being involved in starting new ministries with children and young people. These are areas already in our Vision Plan. The Mission Action Team is also in the process of discerning a mission focus group, a special target ministry we can get behind as a parish – and you’ll be hearing more about that in the coming months. We’re hopefully going to approve the Reconciliation Action Plan at Parish Council this month, and we’re developing a concept for the yarning circle you’ve been hearing about. And we’re making progress towards implementing the Music Programme from the start of next year (concert today is a fundraiser). There’s a sense that God’s Spirit is moving in and among us as these plans and hopes and dreams are emerging, with a certain energy and hopefulness and excitement. All of these things are also opportunities for us to say “yes” to God, to affirm our trust in God’s provision – for where God calls, God provides.

And our “yes”, each of our “yes”es is one of the ways God provides for God’s people and for the world. Our “yes” to God’s work in and through St Margaret’s will hopefully be a commitment or pledge of a percentage of our income – 10% is the biblical suggestion. It’s tempting to baulk at that figure, but those who tithe usually find their needs are more than met in the 90% that’s left. To give a tenth of what we receive is a big “yes”, a gesture of trust that God will give us what we need. That’s why we’re working towards giving 10% of our property income in the parish to mission, to those who can multiply the work God in spaces we as a parish can’t reach – like Trinity College, ABM, and Anglicare homeless women, and the chaplaincy at Greensborough Plaza. I have personally committed to this 10% - most of it coming to St Margaret’s, and the rest to a number of charities. If you can’t give 10%, then maybe the challenge is to step up what you are giving by one more percent this year as you say “yes” to God’s work being done in and through you.

The other part of “yes” to God, is about willingness to listen, to hear, and to follow, to go where we are sent, and to use our gifts and talents as God intended. Mary’s greatest gift was her listening heart and willing spirit, and her humility enough to trust God with all that she was. May we find that same “yes” echoing in our hearts, each of us, and we together as a parish, as we turn from fear and embrace the life God has for us.

The Lord be with you.

**And also with you.**