**Lent 1 2023 Based on Sam Wells Book *Love Mercy***

How is it that we are to walk humbly with God and live mercifully? Rev Sam Wells proposes exploring twelve steps to peace. Some of you may be instantly irritated by this topic. You may be asking why do we need to consider this? I am going to take you back to Wednesday when we told God we are sorry for our shortcomings and we pledged to do better in the future. This is the basis on which I offer these reflections.

On Wednesday I reminded you of our different learning styles so we need to keep these in mind; oral, aural, kinaesthetic and image based. Whatever we learn in the next few weeks will be mediated via our preference. So? The weeks ahead may offer you an opportunity for a closer walk with God if you are up for some self-examination. I suggest we all need some reconciliation to Self, God and others.

Psychologists speak of the shadow self. Those parts of the self that we dislike, and split off and often project on to others. For example; she doesn’t listen, or she has no empathy. If I make those statements they are actually about my own flaws. I am inviting you to think on those parts of yourself that you disown.

The next part of reconciliation is with God. How honest can we be about our flaws before God?

The third aspect is about reconciliation with our community and you might like to think about life right here at SME. I am going to tell you something for nothing. There are some hurts that run deep in this community. I have come to know you well enough now to know where they reside. You might like to make it a personal project to examine a particular hurt that you carry and look to bringing healing balm to it.

Of course, there is another big issue that you are going to be called to vote on later in the year; the Voice to Parliament. While you think about the hurts that you carry and the reconciliation you long for, you might think on this issue as a backdrop as well.

Each week in lent I will put the twelve steps up on a slide so that you can refer to them. You will notice that when it comes to reconciliation to self, God and other the steps can meld into each other and overlap.

With these thoughts in place, I turn briefly to today’s gospel. Jesus went into the wilderness for 40 days and was tempted by the devil. The productive way to understand this story is to see it as a metaphor that explores our desire to be powerful and comfortable. Did Jesus actually meet a dark figure with supernatural power and a pitchfork? No. We hear that Jesus withdrew after his baptism, after being touched by the Holy Spirit to wrestle with the journey ahead. Would he listen to God’s call to ministry, or would he go home to a warm bed and his mother’s cooking? We know the path he chose. So in a way, this story of challenge meets us as we begin to think about reconciliation and mercy. Are you up for the challenge?

The first six steps towards mercy constitute an initiative of transformation. The next six steps are offered as a way of embedding the first six in a specific understanding of what peace means.

Wells reminds us that in the Eucharist service we use the confession. It is an indication that Christians are always in the process of making peace, and reconciliation always involves us in disentangling ourselves from the hurtful muddles we find ourselves in.

This disentangling isn’t just about thinking. We need to open ourselves to the leading of the Spirit. This is how Wells explains we may glimpse the foretaste of heaven on earth. Do you want to ask; ‘but how do I do it? I do!

How to we achieve the peace that will enable this? Wells names three aspects of the peace process. It can be visualised as a of triangle. One side is personal experience. This side may be painful because of long-standing bitterness or abiding guilt.

The Second side represents structural intrinsic and systematic inequality. Personal antagonism may be subsumed within a whole swathe of wrongs across time and space.

Third side is a form of emotional philosophical and theological prescription.

He aims to demonstrate that the bible is not a spiritual pious text set apart from the thick practices in each of the three sides of the triangle. Far from it, Wells identifies the bible as a source of stories of the agonizing journey to peace.

Another other point that I want to make is that churchgoers are long left with suggestions about changes that **Jesus would have us make but little information on the process that we need?** If you have a Spiritual Director, or you are minded to pursue spiritual growth, you may have some ideas on how to go about creating change but if these activities are not on your radar then you may need some inspiration.

Wells identifies the question that begins the path to peace as: ‘What has become of me? Perhaps we know we have become a shadow of our former self, perhaps bent on revenge, shorn of humanity, kindness, humour, self-awareness and decency. He uses the example of the prodigal son. He as in abject poverty and his brother was consumed by envy. In order to emerge from the conflict, both parties had to reassert a sense of their own identity that was not subsumed in the conflict.

The path to peace begins with the decision about identity. Just like the 12 step used in AA program, a person must recognise their own powerlessness - that life have become unmanageable. ‘My life is overwhelmed by this conflict’ I cannot extinguish it and it will eventually consume me all together.

The path to peace lies in highlighting and understanding the perception of difference as creative as place that can generate creativity. Recently I called this creative synthesis, it is a form of blessing.

The path to peace lies in learning to harness the dynamic and life-giving aspects of tension. But this also requires us to let go of fear, suspicion insecurity that can allow tension to turn to conflict.

AMEN

Reference

Wells, S. *Love Mercy* Canterbury Press 2020 passim.