

Stewardship Sunday 2 May 2010
Sermon by Venerable Susanna Pain

Acts 11: 1-18; Rev 21: 1-6

Imagine a church full of people where all feel included, all have a place, all contribute a place where people are growing, growing in their relationship with God, others and selves.

The poor and needy are cared for, so is our Earth. People are visions, dream dreams. There is joy, and laughter, and peace and beauty. There is seriousness and play and affirmation and love..

The world pictured in revelations is not something pie in the sky. It is for here and now.. something we create when open to Spirit.

Imagine..

In the Acts reading I see the community in a time of change – they have to let go of some of their understanding of God and each other. They are being challenged to look, to listen, to include ... to go where the spirit blows. Trish Watts sings from John's gospel:

*'the wind blows where it will
you know not where its coming from
and where its going to
so too are those, those who are born of the spirit..'*

A paradigm shift is happening here in Acts. The smallness of this small community's vision has limited them – and can limit us. They need to see the big picture to get out of the rut of thinking God's vision. Jesus' vision includes the gentiles. Peter's God was too small – he and the community needed to be jolted out of complacency of thinking they know God's view of things as always generous loving. Look at Jesus. Look at the story of the prodigal son, feeding of 5000 and on and on ... even Jesus forgives his killers as he dies. What generous love!

Peter is praying when he sees a vision. This is a key – praying. Keeping the channels of communication open, open to God and listening – opening to possibilities – and then sometimes we are surprised, shaken out of our comfort zone. Peter saw a vision which shook him to his core... he was being asked to make a fundamental shift (I suppose the ground had been prepared by Jesus in what he said and how he acted) but this was new to Peter! 'Kill and eat' he heard. 'No way!' he said... he explained his vision step by step... explained how he changed, how he grew. Peter changed - his vision enlarged.

'Expect the unexpected - in the journey with God, be open to ideas – don't disregard them out of hand... this reading suggests. So, I wonder, where are the limits of our vision? Where are we stuck? How inclusive are we?

(the wind – blows where it wills...)

Holy Spirit expands the mind- does not distinguish between them and us.

“Holy Spirit fell on them as it did on us,” said Peter. Renewal is a constant process.. We can’t just look back and get stuck in the past... How open are we to a different of doing things?

Peter and the church in Jerusalem shift dramatically towards a more generous inclusive way of being in community.

How about us? Where are we?

Today begins a month when we listen, imagine and act,
when we focus on our stewardship –
what we offer back to God, to our community, to ourselves in generosity.
I am talking about money.
I am talking about time.
I am talking about talents/gifts.

Today the focus is on money for ministry. Next week, on our plant - our buildings - where ministry is enabled. The following week is our consultation about our strategic plan – where are we heading? What are our priorities, our vision?
Then finally, on 23 May, Pentecost we will focus on the gifts of the spirit – how do we engage? At Pentecost, there will be opportunities to offer your commitments to the parish.

Several years ago we imagined we let our vision broaden, we looked at the gaps, stepped out in faith and we employed a youth worker 2 days per week – Rhys. From 5 people in youth group we now have over 30 including 7 youth leaders who lead small groups and assist in planning with youth camp, Black Stump, services, ReNew, Y Space.

Just over 12 months ago we stepped out again. We employed 2 children and family workers –

Susan Joy for 2 days per week. She is doing children’s church, resources, Saturday Sunset, liturgy, training over 60 kids - if they all came on the same day, 3 classes, each with 2 teachers per week.
Andrea for 1 day per week. She is doing Rainbow Fellowship twice per month, outings, using 6 + 3 volunteers as well as Rainbow Playgroup (22 kids on Fridays) 28 in total, 7 new families.

We pay Paul 9 hours per week for admin, supporting, enabling.

All give above and beyond paid hours. All are supported by volunteers. Our vision is expanding, growing.

Surprising!

We need money to support this growth
to employ these workers
to move forward...
perhaps someone to work with young adults and encounter service.

My role is growing, expanding – some exciting initiative include:

Breathing spaced

Encounter

We have links with

Tikondane

Solomon's

Central Australia

Young adults

Choir and orchestra

At the last Parish Council meeting, Bob Arthur supplied a statement of income and expenditure for the year to March 30. This showed actual total givings at \$44460, \$5540 less than budgeted givings of \$50000 for the year to March 30. Over a full year, actual givings would, at this rate, be \$22160 below budget, i.e. 11% of total budgeted givings.

Assuming 160 families in the parish (taken from the current roll), actual givings were running at an average of just over \$21 per week for the first quarter. To meet budgeted giving of \$200000 over the year, givings need to be running at an average of \$24 per family per week throughout the year. Since givings had already fallen a little behind in the first quarter, families need to be giving, on average, \$25 per week from the start of April to bring the total in on budget.

You may want to know that total income to the end of March was \$5256 less than budgeted, but with total expenses (excluding loan repayments) also running below budget, we had only a small deficit of \$513. The deficit by year-end, including loan repayments, is estimated (without new commitments) to be \$3897.

So we're not in bad shape but once we take out a loan for the capital works, loan repayments will start to play a much larger role. We need to focus on givings relative to current week-to-week commitments. We do need to keep upward momentum moving. Growth in worship participation has averaged more than 10% p.a. over the last 5 years and Sunday collections have increased by 50% over this time.

Good on you. Keep up the good work... be excited. Be open to surprises. Expand your vision. Those who don't direct debit may like to consider that as a way of giving 52 weeks a year...

Generosity costs less than it pays

The measure with which you measure will be measured out to you... (Mark 4:24)

A thought provoking poem by Rabindranath Tagore tells of a beggar at the side of the road who is visited by a king who is on a journey. The king asks the beggar to give him a gift from his tattered bag. The beggar is startled, for he has been thinking that the king will be giving him something rather than asking him for a gift. After all, the beggar has so little. The king has so much. The beggar reluctantly reaches into his bag and pulls out just one kernel of corn and gives it to the king. At the end of the day, when the beggar opens and empties his bag to see what he has gleaned from the day's contributions, he discovers one tiny kernel of gold. Tagore ends the poem with the beggar miserably regretting his failure to give the king all that he had.

I try to remember this powerful message when I am reluctant to give of my presence and talents, when I hold back out of fear or selfishness. Love poured out in full

measure will be returned in full measure, maybe not in the manner expected, but it will return in some form of abundance.

Each day you ask me to share from the wealth of my life, God. Help me to give generously, without resistance or resentment, and to trust that all shall be well.

Last year I gave out money – remember.
This year I challenge you to give generously to support.

Revelation's concluding two chapters paint a spectacular verbal portrait of life as God intends for us to live. It is explicitly not a fantasy for the future, but a revealed picture of what life as church is intended by God to be, and is now on "the other side of the veil" (21:6). It is a world of great natural abundance, of flowing water and ripe fruit. In other words, it is our precious planet as God created it, apart from human sinfulness that has marred so terribly its divinely made beauty. And in that world, God dwells not in a grand temple like the other gods of the ancient world (or the gods of global capital, ensconced in skyscrapers), but in a tent in the midst of the people (21:3).

And, perhaps most amazingly, it is not a human building project, but a pure gift from God (21:6). To live in New Jerusalem is not to "get busy" but to remove the blinders from our eyes and to see life as it really is, right here and right now. For the churches, this means not simply celebrating God's reign in worship (although it does mean that), but living as God's people right in the midst of "Babylon." To truly be church is to be New Jerusalem in the world: to be a place where God and God's Lamb reign in justice and abundance for all people; a place whose gates are always open and whose light always shines; a place of great joy where the darkness of violence, exploitation, and death is banished (21:8). Revelation is not a word of doom and gloom, but a vibrant and exciting call to live now in God's reign. (by Wes Howard-Brook, extracted from Seasons of the Spirit, Congregational Life)