

**Sermon: Rev Susanna Pain**  
**26 October 2008**

Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost

**READING**

Matthew 22: 34-46

Today's gospel is a veritable q & a ... Jesus is questioned, and asks some of his own! So, I'd like to ask you three questions and you can ask me three questions at the end of the sermon, if you like. Fair enough?

The first is:

What is the greatest commandment? (easy huh?)

Second:

How is your relationship with God?

And finally:

How is your relationship with those closest to you?

and those on the margins?

... I suspect all these questions are linked!

Recently I've returned from the desert of Central Australia. I went exhausted, full of noise and junk, too much stuff clogging the flow of living water within. Empty and dry.

Before the landscape of vibrant colour, ancient culture, red rocks, trees growing from cracks in the rock face – I fell silent.

I began to rest, to open up, to listen. I have no words. I was lightening the load, connecting with God and listening.

I listened to the land and to her peoples through art, film, culture, dance ... I listened for the voice of God, in God's creation and in God's people.

I took with me to the desert, Esther de Waal's book 'Lost in Wonder' and these words from Jean Danielou:

I have a need of such a clearance as the saviour effected in the temple of Jerusalem a riddance of the clutter of what is secondary that blocks the way to the all-important central emptiness which is filled with the presence of God alone. (page 55)

And a version of Psalm 55:

Your arms are wide and welcoming. In your presence we are relaxed and feel most strangely at home. (page 19)

I hear Jesus say: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself.'

Sometimes I need to be silent, to listen, to reconnect before moving forward, to be compassionate with myself, to rest in God before I move out and 'be' a God person in the community, to receive healing, and love, to enable me to share with others.

How about you? (Sorry, another question.) Where are you at the moment? Do you need to 'get rid of the clutter that blocks the way to the all-important central emptiness which is filled with the presence of God alone'? That's what I did in the wilderness.

Somehow loving our neighbour as ourself is inextricably linked to the first commandment, but I need to clear the way, to sink into God, to relax into God's presence, to sense the presence of God for this time and place.

The poet Rilke writes:

*All who seek you, rest God  
and those who find you, bind you  
to image and gesture*

*I would rather sense you  
as the earth senses you.  
In my ripening ripen what you are.*

It can go both ways. Drawing closer to God, draws me closer to myself and others.

Drawing closer to others draws me closer to God.

Sometimes I feel closest to God when I am enfolded in Nikolai's arms, when I am with a person sick in hospital, silent, holding a hand, listening or praying. In community, singing a Taizé chant, receiving communion, at a working bee, standing beside a mentally ill woman – in all these actions I love God.

An article in the Canberra Times on Tuesday 14 October reported some figures from Care Financial Services clients. They report budgets for a day to include all food and drink:

|                |         |
|----------------|---------|
| Students       | \$4.30  |
| Aged pensioner | \$6.70  |
| Household of 4 | \$18.50 |

What would you eat, what would you drink?

This puts my budget into perspective – what I spend on morning or afternoon tea alone, let alone meals out.

How would you survive on \$4.30 for food for a day? You wouldn't eat half the time – and this is in Australia.

St John's Care reports on their client who came after not eating for several days – and these are people with wages.

Love your neighbour as yourself?

Keith Waters writes in Anglican News:

The world's biggest economies are on life support.

Dramatic events in recent days and weeks have highlighted that governments are prepared to dig deep into surpluses or go deeper into debt to feed our faith in the deity that has become "the market".

But what would the world look like if our politicians had had the will to throw similar amounts at material and emotional poverty before now?

In coming months, many more Australians will be at risk of poverty. They will experience new pressures life-limiting pressures.

The poor did not create this problem and must not be forced to pay for it. They did not make high-risk investments that have gotten the world into this mess.

The comprehensive failure of extreme capitalism is a reminder that greed is not good.

There is something terribly awry in our thinking about the global financial crisis which has rolled down on us all. The current economic crisis is trying to tell us that our way of life is unsustainable. Our politicians and business experts want to "fix" the crisis without stopping to wonder what it is trying to teach us.

What is this crisis telling us about our obsession with materialism, wealth and power, credit and responsible financial choices, economic values versus family-friendly values, generosity and justice, and both personal and social responsibility?

What is it telling us about the role of the market, the place of social regulation, the spiritual consequences of economic disparities, the moral health of an economy, and the criteria of the common good?

The words of Devinder Shama with the advocacy organisation Share the World's Resources (STWR) ring loud, "The one trillion dollar bailout package that President Bush is promising could have wiped out the last

traces of poverty, hunger, malnutrition and squalor from the face of the earth – if only our global leadership prioritised the poor with the same level of urgency as the financial crisis.”

Whilst it's debatable whether the Shama is right, the point is not lost that the same level of response to prop up a system which has made record profits off the back of low income and middle income earners has not been applied to addressing poverty or inequality either in the US or in Australia.

Today is as good as any to imagine, 'what if the world's most powerful leader had the will to find a trillion dollars to enable the most disadvantaged to reach their potential?'

It is heartening to see the Rudd Government's response which appears to have given further confidence to those with home loans, tries to protect those at most risk and commits funds to boost employment in the face of a certain downturn. All of these measures are welcome. But what more can be done?

On a policy level what federal government can and should do is promote and implement social inclusion initiatives across all policy areas to protect Australia's most vulnerable against the worst of the ongoing economic turbulence. Social inclusion is more than the simplistic provision of income security.

Our first minister for Social Inclusion, Julia Gillard, is right when she says, poverty interacts with other forms of disadvantage to produce deep and persistent social exclusion.

Without access to health, housing, transport and services, education and opportunities to be politically engaged, incremental increases or one off payments in income support can be severely lessened in value. A society that embraces social inclusion is one that will be able to support people most likely to get into trouble from an economic downturn.

The ambitious agenda set by Rudd to tackle homelessness and narrow the gap between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians must not be allowed to fall off the table.

On a broader level now is the time to give life to a set of values which puts people over possessions, that balances personal interests with the common good, that seeks to be good stewards of the environment, our gifts, our time, and leaves the world better for the next generation.

Last week we as a parish applied for some funding to employ a parish nurse to address this issue of social isolation and continue our outreach and pastoral care to include and support all.

Many people from here volunteer at St John's Care, Amity, Calvary – many are generous in donating food and money to support these services.

In reflecting on today's gospel, I am pulled up short again and encouraged to reflect on: How do I love my neighbour as myself?

Last week I preached at St Luke's Enmore. It was a delight to be among such an eclectic bunch of people, embodying what they state on their website. They are "a progressive Anglo-Catholic parish, which seeks to share God's unconditional love of all people, regardless of age, gender, race, marital or family status, sexual orientation, disability or wealth" and they seem to be doing this well, through friendship groups, op shop, support of ABM ...

In conclusion, I want to share a story of hope with you.

On our first evening in Alice Springs, Nikolai and I went to a performance of Ngapartji Ngapartji, loosely translated as 'I give you something, you give me something'.

We learned some Pitjantjutjara, we sang 'heads, shoulders, knees and toes' in Pitjantjutjara and English. We heard the story of Maralinya, the aunties sang, an uncle drew and we heard some of the Spinifex people's stories. Near the end of the performance some of the old women came down into the audience and holding my hand, I and a number of others were brought up onto the stage. We had to lay out pieces of broken pottery, and sing, side by side with the women, in the sand. I was deeply moved. I felt accepted and loved, and I loved the touch of that old woman's hand, and the look in her eye. There was peace and reconciliation – so much symbolism and rebuilding. As she later took me down from the stage she pressed a small pinch pot into my hand, made by the children during the performance. I was touched and changed.

'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind and  
Love your neighbour as yourself.'

I did.

My understanding and desire to sit alongside indigenous people increased.

Someone asked me this week about sin. Sin is anything that gets in the way of relationship with God and others. I think Jesus would rather focus on the positive – do this, rather than don't do that.

How can I overcome the obstacles to improve that relationship – to focus on the relationship rather than the sin? To love God and neighbour as self? They go together – inextricably linked – can't have one without the other.

I am left with a difficult question:

How do I show love of God  
love of neighbour  
love of self?

If I were to take an audit of my life, of yours ... what would I see?

Is there congruence between words and deeds?

Do these commandments sharpen my priorities? ...

Now, what are your questions?