

Garry's Pastoral Letter – 2nd Sunday after Pentecost

Dear members and friends of St Agnes' Church

The parish council has deferred its June meeting to next Monday evening, June 22. My thanks to the 14 people who have let me know how they would feel about returning to worship in the church building (under very different circumstances, of course). It would be good to hear from others also.

Next Sunday, at 10am, I intend to share a short worship service via the video-link software known as 'zoom'. If you have a computer or tablet + an internet connection, you can join in. It is also possible to join via a phone-call. If you wish to participate, please get in touch and I will respond with details about how to log in. I'm also available to come to your house to give a demonstration during the week.

I've included, below, a sermon for the third Sunday after Pentecost and the lectionary readings for daily prayer. You can find the Archbishop's weekly message at <https://youtu.be/KOORw3TVDtg>.

We will endeavour to keep the church open between 10am and 12 noon, Monday to Thursday, if you'd like to pop in the back door for a prayer or to leave some non-perishable goods for the St Mark's meal programme in Fitzroy.

The blessing of God be with you all,

Garry Deverell

Vicar

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Prayer of the day (2nd Sunday after Pentecost, June 14)

All-powerful God, in Jesus Christ you turned death into life and defeat into victory: increase our faith and trust in him that we may triumph over evil in the strength of the same Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Prayer of the week (June 14-20)

Lord, we beseech you to keep your family, the church, in continual godliness, that through your protection we may be free from all adversities and devoutly given to serve you in all good works, to the glory of your name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Prayer of the day (3rd Sunday after Pentecost, June 21)

Gracious God, we who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death: we pray that, as you raised him from death, so by the power of the Holy Spirit we may live the new life to your glory, knowing ourselves to be to sin but alive for you in Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Lectionary Readings for the week of May 14-20

June 2020

	HC	MP	EP	
14	SECOND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST [11]			G
	<i>Main Readings</i>	<i>Supplementary Readings</i>		
	Genesis 18.1-15; (21.1-7)	§ Ps 34	Genesis 20	
	Ps 116.1-2, 11-18	§ Matthew 12.1-8	Ps 100	
	Romans 5.1-11		Romans 5.10-17	
	Matthew 9.35 - 10.8 (9-23)			
	[Exodus 19.2-8a; Ps 100]			
15	Monday G			
	<i>Evelyn Underhill, spiritual writer (d. 1941)</i>		<i>Collect of an Ascetic</i>	W
	1 Kings 21.1-16	Ps 104.1-25	Ps 104.26-37	
	Ps 5.1-6	2 Chronicles 6.12-31	Proverbs 12.1-14	
	Matthew 5.38-42	Acts 9.32-43	2 Corinthians 11.7-15	
16	Tuesday G			
	1 Kings 21.17-29	Ps 105.1-22	Ps 105.23-45	
	Ps 51.10-14	2 Chronicles 6.32 - 7.6	Proverbs 12.15-28	
	Matthew 5.43-48	Acts 10.1-16	2 Corinthians 11.16-29	
17	Wednesday G			
	2 Kings 2.1 (2-5) 6-14	Ps 106.1-24	Ps 106.25-50	
	Ps 31.21-27	2 Chronicles 7.7-22	Proverbs 13.1-14	
	Matthew 6.1-6, 16-18	Acts 10.17-33	2 Corinthians 11.30 - 12.5	
18	Thursday G			
	Sirach 48.1-14	Ps 107.1-22	Ps 107.23-43	
	Ps 97.1-9	2 Chronicles 8	Proverbs 13.15 - 14.6	
	Matthew 6.7-15	Acts 10.34-48	2 Corinthians 12.6-13	
19	Friday G			
	2 Kings 11.1-4, 9-20	Pss 110; 111	Pss 112; 113	
	Ps 132.10-18	2 Chronicles 9.1-12	Proverbs 14.7-19	
	Matthew 6.19-23	Acts 11.1-18	2 Corinthians 12.14-21	
20	Saturday G			
	2 Chronicles 24.17-25	Pss 114; 115	Pss 116; 117	
	Ps 89.1-4	2 Chronicles 9.13-31	Proverbs 14.20-35	
	Matthew 6.24-34	Acts 11.19-30	2 Corinthians 13	

Lectionary Readings for 3rd Sunday after Pentecost, June 21

Genesis 21.8-21; Psalm 86.1-10. 16-17; Romans 6.1-11; Matthew 10.24-39

Conversion: Unplugging from the Matrix

Texts: Genesis 21.8-21; Psalm 86.1-10, 16-17; Romans 6.1b-11; Matthew 10.24-39

In the Wachowskis' classic science-fiction film, *The Matrix*, a young computer programmer named Neo Anderson is restless and deeply unhappy with his life. He shouldn't be, of course. He has a successful and rewarding job, is good-looking, and has any number of potential partners knocking on his door. He is actually living the life that his world defines as successful. But for all that, Neo must contend, daily, with a feeling that the life he lives is somehow just a shadow of what it ought to be, and that the world he inhabits is somehow unreal and without meaning. There are no grounds for this feeling, of course. But it is there, nonetheless, and it is beginning to affect his performance not only at work, but at life. Then, one day, something very strange happens. A message appears on his computer, unbidden. It says 'Wake up Neo, follow the white rabbit'. For what happens thereafter, you will have to watch the film. Suffice to say, however, that what Neo discovers is that the world he inhabits is indeed unreal, no more than a huge computer-generated programme called 'the matrix', a programme designed to keep people's minds busy with meaningless tasks so that they will never discover the truth: the truth that that they are no longer free human beings but slaves, battery-cells to power the machines that have taken over the world. What Neo discovers, further, is that in order to live in the real world, in order to fight the all-encompassing power of the machines and recover his humanity, he must 'unplug' from the matrix and its values and wake up to a new, but altogether more sobering, reality altogether.

Now, let me suggest to you that the story of Neo Anderson can be read as a parable of Christian conversion. For what we are converted to in our Christian baptism is a new experience of reality, a reality in which we are no longer cogs in a machine, parts of a systematic whole that steals our humanity away, but free human beings who know how to exercise our liberty for the sake of a commonwealth of truth, love and justice, a commonwealth announced and inaugurated by Jesus Christ. Let me illustrate what such a conversion might mean *today* with a couple of examples.

One of the wholes of which we are apparently part is the nation state of Australia. The idea of Australia runs deep in our veins. It is an idea that most of us have imbibed with our mother's milk. The idea of Australia is transmitted to us through stories and images; and through rousing anthems, like the national anthem, which tells us that Australia is 'young and free,' a place where hard work is rewarded with 'wealth'. It also puts forward the idea of a commonwealth of land, in which all Australians, including those who have 'come across the seas', can share. Now, if I had time, I would point out that there is a great distance between the idea of Australia put forth in our national anthem and the reality of Australia as it has been experienced by, for example, First Peoples, asylum seekers, or the 14% of Australians who currently live in poverty. But, for now, I will only point out that for a Christian theology drawn from the New Testament the idea of the nation state is rooted in the very worst side of human possibility. It is rooted in our sin and fear. For nation states exist *not* as instruments to promote the reign of God—that borderless commonwealth of truth, justice and peace announced by Jesus—but rather the very opposite of that commonwealth: a drawing of thick borders in order to defend the wealth and privileges of a few against everyone else. If that is what it means to be Australian, and I am prepared to argue the point until the cows come home, then the Christian is actually called to be *un-Australian*, to 'unplug' from the agenda of nation-specific interests in the name of Christ's borderless kingdom, which looks out for the good of everyone, no matter what their national or ethnic identity.

A second example. Each of us have also been inducted, since birth, into the idea of the family, the clan, or the tribe. The meaning of the family is this: that my biological makeup determines the

social reality to which I owe my allegiance and my work. Everything I do must be for the 'good', the social and economic advancement that is, of those with whom I share my specific biological makeup. My identity and purpose as an individual, therefore, is nothing other than the defence of *my* family's interests over and against the interests of *other* families. Now, in the ancient near-east, the idea of the family was of course much more expansive than it is today. Today the family has all but shrunk to the size of its nucleus in mum, dad, and the kids. Yet the ancient idea of family persists in great strength: I am part of a circumscribed whole to which I owe my loyalty against every other claimant, every other *neighbour*. For today's family, just as in ancient times, the members of other families are to be regarded as the competition. I must compete *against* these others for a slice of the scarce resources of economic and social capital.

Now, Jesus came to confront and relativise the power of what may be called, without any irony whatsoever, the 'family matrix'. That is why his sayings against the family occur so regularly in the gospels. Let me quote from today's gospel text:

Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother . . . and one's foes will be the members of one's household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me . . .

Why are we so scandalised by these texts, why do we recoil in horror when we hear them? If we were really Christians, we would not! For what Christ confronted in his own society is what he would confront today: that deep anthropological drive in all of us towards the idolatry of family, an idolatry that says we must defend and preserve our own family's economic and social interests over and against the interest that God has declared in *all* families. For God has declared that there is only one family, the universal human family, of which the equalitarian community of the New Testament church is the most potent sign and symbol.

Thus, the Christian can never embrace the slogan 'family first', unless that family is re-understood as a commonwealth of all God's people. Christians are called to 'unplug' from the drives of family tribalism and learn instead to share, radically, their resources and skills with other families as well. In that light, how can I give my kids the very best my society offers in terms of health, education, and the development of human potential, if I am not prepared to work hard so that these goods can be shared with the many who do not, currently, enjoy them? For the follower of Christ, to give my children what I am not prepared to make possible for other children as well, is idolatry: my family becoming god, so that everything else must bow to its demands. If we shudder at Christ's words, perhaps we have not 'unplugged'. Perhaps we are still in thrall to the gods of this world, the machinery that ensures that there is always some who win, but many who also lose.

But let's be honest for a moment. 'Unplugging,' being really *converted* to the way of Christ all the way through, is really, really scary for many of us. For we know jolly well that being converted to Christ is to be converted to the love of those neighbours we are most afraid of, or least understand. Why should we make ourselves vulnerable in that way? Won't we get hurt? Isn't there a chance that we might lose all that we have worked for, all that we have made of ourselves? What then? Questions like that go to the heart of our identities as human beings. Who am I if cannot draw strong borders around myself or my family or my nation? Who am I if cannot build a strong future for my children? Who am I if I am not the member of a successful family, or the citizen of a great nation? Who am I? It is questions like these, I suggest, that have made historic Christianity so unpopular today. For people know that Christianity calls for a radical

re-assessment of personal identity and meaning, and they are afraid. Afraid of losing who they think they are, however miserable, afraid of the unknown. That fear is understandable, oh-so-understandable, and none of us are immune from it. But the good news of the gospel is this: that there is no need to fear, because what we fear is not as powerful as it appears. The powers that we fear have no more power than what we choose to give them.

It's all a matter of faith, you see, of what you believe. If you believe that life is about defending your own interests against those of others, then of course everyone and everything else will feel like a threat. If these others are people, indeed, then perhaps they will learn to become enemies because we expect them to be. But if, instead, we believe in what Jesus tells his disciples in the gospel, then life may be experienced rather differently:

Have no fear of those who can kill the body who cannot kill the soul', he says, 'Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father. Even the hairs of your head are numbered. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows . . . Those who find their life will lose it, but those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

Can you hear the reassurance there? Can you grasp this alternative view of reality? If we *really* believed that God loves us, that we are the apple of God's eye, then all life's apparent threats, even the economic and social ones, would simply fade into shadow. For if God loves us, God also gives us an identity, purpose and future that is able to persevere even if our families call us 'mad', and our society calls us 'evil'. We can believe this, as Christians, because Christ persevered. His family members quite often considered him mad, and his society condemned him to death as a dangerous criminal. For all this, Christ persevered. Not because he had magical powers to convince people that they were wrong. No. Christ persevered because *God disagreed* with the assessment of both his family and his society. When Christ was crucified, God raised him to life: not simply to fight another day, but to reveal and inaugurate a new reality, a reality that is *more real* than the reality our society makes to keep us from the truth. On the basis of this *more real reality*, the reality of God, Christians are empowered to 'unplug' from the cultures that enslave us, and dance to the beat of a different drummer. We can do this if we have faith, if we trust in God's reality more than we trust in the reality we are sold by family, nation or television. Jesus told his disciples that while the truth might seem hidden now, there would come a day when it would be out there for all to see. In the meantime, we who try to tell the secret before its time can expect to be given a hard time. That is how it was with Christ. Why should it be any different for his servants?

In the story of *The Matrix*, Neo Anderson becomes a new messiah, a new Son of Man (as his name suggests). He blazes a trail for the liberation of the world from the matrix, from the complex system of lies and subterfuge that keeps us in chains. For what Neo learns to do, through a process of conversion that lasts for most of the film, is to trust not in what his eyes and ears tell him, but in what the Spirit whispers in his heart. If we can do the same, then we shall be reborn as well. Reborn to a world in which the dog-eat-dog dynamics of competition and capitalism no longer rule our lives. Reborn to a world in which the practises of love, of sacrifice and giving, become infections that are able to re-model the world in truth, justice and peace. So, tell me, who do you trust? Whose version of the world do you believe? And perhaps more importantly, what are you going to do about it?

Garry Deverell