

Garry's Pastoral Letter – 3rd Sunday after Pentecost

Dear members and friends of St Agnes' Church

The parish council will meet on Monday evening, June 22. We will again discuss the circumstances under which we might resume our activities and let you know as soon as possible thereafter should we decide to reactivate some of what we would normally do.

A reminder that, **at 10am tomorrow morning**, I intend to share a **short worship service via zoom**. I look forward to seeing some of you then. You may wish to keep your prayer book and a bible handy, along with your own bread and wine to share at communion. (I make no theological commentary on whether the bread and wine you might share in your home is 'truly' the body and blood of Christ. If you wish to think of this as an 'agape meal' rather than communion proper, I make no judgement either way). An order of service for this event can be downloaded [here](#). Details for how to join in were sent out last Sunday.

I've included, below, a sermon for the fourth Sunday after Pentecost and the lectionary readings for daily prayer. You can find the Archbishop's weekly message [here](#). I also draw your attention to this [video](#) of Bishop Chris McLeod, the National Aboriginal Bishop, speaking about the Black Lives Matter movement. +Chris is apparently the *only* senior Anglican figure who currently seems willing to speak about the impact of racism in church and society.

Diana Burt asked me to let you know that she has an upright piano for sale at whatever price you can afford. It is a Becker in an attractive wood and is likely to be at least 60 or 70 years old. For its age it is in reasonable condition but would need tuning. Please get in touch with Diana if you are interested.

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 (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.

Prayer of the week (June 21-27)

Almighty and everlasting God, you are always more ready to hear than we are to pray, and give more than either we desire or deserve: pour down upon us the abundance of your mercy, forgiving us those things of which our conscience is afraid, and giving us those good things which we are not worthy to ask, save through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ, your son our Lord. Amen.

Prayer of the day (4th Sunday after Pentecost, June 28)

O God, your son has taught us that those that give a cup of water in his name will not lose their reward: open our hearts to the needs of your children, and in all things make us obedient to your will, so that in faith we may receive your gracious gift, eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Lectionary Readings for the week of June 21-27

	HC	MP	EP	
21	THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST [12] Main Readings Genesis 21.8-21 Ps 86.1-10, 16-17 Romans 6.1-11 Matthew 10.24-39 [Jeremiah 20.7-13; Ps 69.7-10 (11-15) 16-19]	Supplementary Readings § Ps 93 § Romans 1.20-35	Ps 69.7-19 Genesis 21.22-33 Matthew 10.9-23	G
2	Monday G <i>Alban, first British martyr (d. c. 209)</i> 2 Kings 17.1-18 or 5-8,13-15a,18 Ps 60 Matthew 7.1-5	Ps 118.1-18 2 Chronicles 10 Acts 12.1-11	Collect of a Martyr Pss 118.19-29; 120 Ezekiel 1.1-21 James 1.1-18	R
23	Tuesday 2 Kings 19.8-20, 29-36 Ps 48.1-8 Matthew 7.6 (7-11) 12-14	At Evening Prayer: <i>Birth of John the Baptist</i> Pss 124; 125; 126 2 Chronicles 11 Acts 12.12-25 At Evening Prayer of the day:	<i>Birth of John the Baptist</i> Ps 71.14-24 Malachi 3.1-6 Philippians 3.7-11 Pss 127; 128; 129 Ezekiel 1.22 - 3.3 James 1.19 - 2.7	W
24	Wednesday THE BIRTH OF JOHN THE BAPTIST Proper collect Isaiah 49.1-6 Ps 139.1-11 Acts 13.(16-21) 22-26 Luke 1.57-66, 80	Invitation, Preface, Post-Communion, Blessing [Saints] Ps 50.1-15 Judges 13.2-7, 21-25 Luke 12.49-59	Ps 71 Malachi 3.1-6; 4 Matthew 11.2-19	W
	<i>Of the day:</i> G 2 Kings 22.8-13; 23.1-3 Ps 119.33-40 Matthew 7.15-20	Pss 130; 131; 133 2 Chronicles 12 Acts 13.1-12	Pss 132; 134 Ezekiel 3.4-27 James 2.8-26	
25	Thursday G 2 Kings 24.8-17 Ps 79.1-9 Matthew 7.21-29	Ps 135 2 Chronicles 13 Acts 13.13-25	Ps 136 Ezekiel 4 James 3	
26	Friday G 2 Kings 25.1-12 Ps 137.1-6 Matthew 8.1-4	Pss 137.1-6 (7-9); 138 2 Chronicles 14 Acts 13.26-41	Ps 139 Ezekiel 5 James 4	
27	Saturday G <i>Cyril of Alexandria, bishop and teacher (d. 444)</i> Lamentations 2.1-10 or 2,10-14,18-19 Ps 74.1-11 Matthew 8.5-17	Ps 140 2 Chronicles 15 Acts 13.42-52	Collect of a Teacher Pss 141; 142 Ezekiel 6 James 5	W

Lectionary Readings for 4th Sunday after Pentecost, June 28

Genesis 22.1-14; Psalm 13; Romans 6.12-23; Matthew 10.40-42

'Here I am'

Genesis 22.1-14; Rom 6.12-23; Matt 10.40-42

When Abraham hears the voice of God calling to him, he replies 'here I am'. When Samuel the prophet hears the voice of God calling to him in the middle of the night, he also replies 'here I am'. When Mary of Nazareth is called by the angel Gabriel to be the mother of Jesus Christ, she replies 'Here I am'. 'Here I am'. It is a phrase that signifies the willingness of the individual to put aside whatever they might have been doing, whatever they might have planned to do, whatever (indeed) they might have previously understood the will of God to have been, in order to obey and give themselves over to this new word from God which arrives, fresh and new born, in the moment of the call. 'Here I am', says Abraham. And taking his son, his only son Isaac, whom he loves, Abraham heads off to the mountain of Moriah to sacrifice not only his son, but everything he had come to believe about God's plans for himself and his family up until that point.

The simplicity and immediacy of Abraham's response in our text seems to offend our sense of how things would 'really' be, psychologically, if we ourselves were confronted with such a call. Abraham had, after all, been working to a rather different game-plan up until now. Long ago, God had called him to leave his home in Ur and travel to a land far away where he had no family ties or right of claim to the land. Then God had made a solemn covenant with him, promising that through his son Isaac, God would make of Abraham's descendants a great nation through whom the whole world would be blessed. And let's not forget that God had brought Isaac into the world against the odds, in the years of his parent's dotage, when the time for childbearing had well and truly passed! Psychologically, then, I think I would have been quite disturbed if God suddenly turned around and said to me, 'Oh, that game plan we've been working on all these years, I've decided to throw it away. Time to do something different. I want you to kill your son, and with him every sense of destiny that we have ever produced together'. Psychologically, I think I would have been deeply disturbed at what was being proposed. I think I would have struck up an argument with God right there, just as Abraham himself had done a few chapters earlier over the proposed destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. I would have argued that if God were really to go ahead with this change of plan, then God was nothing more than a two-faced liar who could not be trusted to keep a promise. But there is no sign of an argument in the text we have received. The text says, very simply, that Abraham took some wood and some fire, and his son Isaac, and headed off toward Moriah to make the sacrifice.

It should also be acknowledged that the story also offends many of us at a moral level. How can the God of life, the God who called life into being from the watery chaos and condemned Cain for killing his brother Abel, now order his most faithful servant to kill his own son? Isn't there a fundamental inconsistency there? Isn't this kind of blood sacrifice the kind of thing that the pagan gods demanded? Surely it is not the God of Jews and Christians, who would later say 'do not kill' to Moses on the Mount of Sinai, who now commands Abraham to kill his only son, whom he loves? Well, yes it is. It is 'Yahweh', the God of the Jews, in a story that the Jewish people preserved as a treasured part of their holy canon of Scripture. It is not a pagan import. So, what are we to make of all this ethical and psychological trauma, the trauma we ourselves experience in reading this text? And why is there no sign of such disturbance in the text itself?

Time for a little theology!

Today's gospel calls those who receive the word of God 'prophets' and 'the righteous'. But what does righteousness really mean, in Christian faith? Is it to keep the commandments and follow the

letter of the moral law? Well yes . . . and no. Yes, baptised Christians are indeed called to give themselves over to the good described by the Jewish law, to reject those attitudes and behaviours which make only for misery and death in favour of the way of life of goodness that leads to life. That is what the Apostle says to his readers in Rome. 'Now that you have died with Christ to all that is wrong with the world,' he says, 'you are no longer the slaves of sin, but the slaves of righteousness. So give your bodies over to doing what is right'. OK, but that is not the whole story! For the righteousness that Christians are now able to do is not something that they can either produce for themselves or, as something self-produced, depend on to get them into heaven. The Apostle also writes that the righteousness of Christians is a gift from God that comes through faith in Jesus Christ, the son of God, who alone is righteous in God's eyes. It is not something that anyone is able to produce for themselves. It is not a reward for being good and keeping the moral law. It is a gift, the gift of Christ's very life which, having been laid down for us on the cross, now wells up in us as the power of resurrection, the power of life beyond the wages or consequence of our failure to keep the moral law, namely death.

In this perspective, the Christian is not under law, but under grace. We are called to do what is right, certainly, but what is right is no longer defined by a narrow keeping of the moral law, as if that could save us. It is defined by a fundamental decision to trust in the promise of God and cling to God as one who graciously gives life, even to the dead. According to Saint Paul, it is this very faith and trust in God's promise that motivated Abraham.

What our Genesis text preserves, you see, is the virtue of this fundamental faith and trust in the God of life. When God calls Abraham to sacrifice his son in an act that would appear to contradict everything that God had hitherto promised to do, Abraham chooses to believe that appearances can be deceiving. He makes what the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard rightly called 'a leap of faith', a leap into what appears (to our human imagination) to be either irrational or immoral in the name of a fundamental faith and trust in the God whose gift to us is life, even when we are dead. At the moment when the call came to him, Abraham had no way of knowing for sure how the story would finish. The simplicity of his submission, his 'Here I am' exudes a quiet but hard-won faith that God would again gift him with life and future, in spite of the logic of what appeared to be happening, the logic that would lead to the death of his son, and with him, of the promise of a nation that would bless the whole world. At this point, he chooses to believe in the God of life even as that God appears to be leading him into the land of death. His faith is vindicated, of course. The story ends with another call from God, and another 'Here I am' from Abraham, in which the boy Isaac is saved, and God provides a Christ-like ram to sacrifice in his place. Still, at the moment when faith is called upon, the way is not always clear. One must choose to trust or not to trust, to give oneself wholly over to God in a belief that all will be well, or else to second-guess God and proceed according to our own lights.

I put it to you that if we are really Christians, we cannot proceed according to our own lights. I put it to you that our own lights get us nowhere except a place that is very dark and dead. Where has the celebrated 'reason' of the so-called Enlightenment got us, if not to the world we actually live in, where technology is stealing away our very humanity, where the vicissitudes of cyber-space and the small-screen distance us from one another, and from caring for one another in the flesh? And where has the 'morality' of the so-called Enlightenment got us, if not to a world where the powerful control everything, even the bodies and the appetites of the poor? Christians are called to listen to other voices, the voices of the prophets who proclaim a salvation that does not come from ourselves - our moral codes or our reason - but from a God who, in the figure of the Crucified One, has forgiven us our many sins and gifted even the dead with life. To those who receive their

word and believe it, to those who make a leap of faith into Christ's arms, there is indeed a reward. The reward that is Christ himself, the light of the world and the author of life in all its fullness. So, to we who profess to believe, there remains the ongoing challenge that is as new today as it ever was. When God calls, shall we reply with a 'Just a minute, let me see how reasonable that request seems' or a 'I just need to see if that fits my moral code'? Or shall we reply in the voice and with the faith of Abraham, 'Here I am?'

Garry Deverell