

**Theme:           Go forth into the world**  
**Readings:       James 2:1-13, John 8:1-10**

Merciful God, thank you that you are with us this morning. As we settle back and think more about this thing called church, I pray that we will do so with open minds, open hearts and the realisation we are all thoroughly soaked in your love.

Amen

This is the last sermon in our series about church, and today we've arrived at the last thing that happens in a church service. I'm talking about the fun bit - where the service ends and we get to hang around chatting to each other over a cup of tea, before wandering out into our respective lives.

Some of the best things that happen in a church happen after the service. It's when prayer ministry happens, and where conversations uncover needs and things we can help each other with. After church is when we catch up with each other, strengthening our bonds. Hugs are often involved. It's a good thing eh?

In Anglican churches, we often say something before we leave. We're going to say it now,

BUT

Before old habits kick in, this isn't the end of the service alright! Promise no sneaky getting up, wandering around and chatting after we say this!

Ready??

"Go now to love and serve the Lord, go in peace"

[Amen, we go in the name of Christ!]

I'm hoping that hasn't had a Pavlov's dog like effect and we're all salivating now thinking of tea and biscuits (or lunch).

How often do we pause to think about what we've just agreed to? What does it mean to go out loving and serving the Lord? What DOES it mean when we say that we go in the name of Christ?

Is anyone brave enough to offer a definition?

So when we go in the name of Christ we're agreeing to go out into the world and act as his reps.

That seems like quite a big job! What sorts of things might that involve?

Looking at the gospels we have lots of examples of things we could be doing - Jesus healed people, offered friendship, reunited families, he asked his disciples to feed hungry people, give thirsty people a drink, clothe people who were naked, visit prisoners and people who are sick. He challenged powerful

people, he made others think differently about their lives, or their possessions. He told stories, he got angry, he was caring, he valued the input of women, children and foreigners.

Where do we even start??

Well, I have to start somewhere, and by way of example, I'm going to pick on one just thing Jesus did - advocacy.

The prime example of this for me is the poor women dragged in front of Jesus, accused of adultery.

We heard it this morning, Jesus teaching in the temple, being interrupted by a crowd with a woman in tow. Apparently she'd been caught red-handed and they wanted to know how Jesus would rule on this particular issue. Not because they actually wanted to know, but so that Jesus had another opportunity to say the wrong thing and condemn himself.

Many things are debated about this story. Was the women actually guilty, or was this a stitch-up? Where's the bloke, and why isn't he being dragged in front of the religious leaders? Could the Jewish leaders actually order an execution, or was that something only the Roman leadership could do? Were there legal loopholes that meant the woman couldn't be tried fairly anyway? What did Jesus write in the sand? Why did Jesus apparently go all soft on the act of adultery?

I'm not even going to try to tackle those questions. But there is one fact that is 100% not up for debate. In this situation, the women was utterly powerless. She was one against a crowd. She was a women up against a bunch of men, and she was an ordinary citizen up against the powerful leaders of her society. She didn't have a leg to stand on.

And what is also not up for debate is that Jesus calmly and non-violently neutralised the threat and sent her off safe and unscathed.

This is a person I'm proud to follow.

There are many other stories in the gospels where Jesus comes to the aid of the powerless and vulnerable - it was one of his defining characteristics.

So what does it mean for us to go in the name of Christ, and to follow this kind of God?

The epistle writer James has one possible answer. His letter is addressed to a huge group - "Jewish Christians abroad" is probably the best way to sum it up. The letter covers a lot of ground, but towards the end we have the little nugget that was read this morning. Something that's so familiar to us.

The norm in our society is to fuss and fawn over money and celebrity, and it would appear it was very much the same 2000 years ago. James warns his readers to watch out - he even says outright that if we're involved in the unequal treatment of people that we can't call ourselves followers of Jesus!!

But there is some other stuff in that reading too. Some more uncomfortable stuff about inequality and our place in that inequality.

Nathan Nettleton has paraphrased it like this:

"It is quite simple to do the right thing — just fulfil the basic law of God's realm, as spelt out in the scriptures: "Love everyone else as you love yourself." But if you show favouritism to the young and beautiful or the wealthy and powerful, then you are violating that law and you stand convicted by it. It will show you for what you are — a sinner. You see, you can't pick and choose when it comes to the law of God. You can't claim exemption from one law on the grounds that you've kept the rest."

I'm happy to admit that I'm a bit of a lefty. I'd go as far as to say I'm a bit of a latte-sipping, liberal, peace-first hankie squeezer.

Apart from the latte sipping bit (I normally go for a long black).

So all this James stuff about inequality, faith and love and justice is alright by me. And Jesus's actions sticking up for the powerless and dispossessed, right on brother.

But the issue for me comes at the end of that passage where James is talking about putting your money, actually your actions, where your mouth is.

James says: "Brothers and sisters, what's the good of claiming to be a person of faith if you never put love into action? Do you think a head full of theoretical faith is enough to save you? You've got to be kidding. Think about this: if someone you know has barely got a stitch to wear or a scrap to eat, and you walk past saying, "Praise the Lord, friend! Be clothed in Christ! Be filled with the Holy Spirit!" and fail to offer even a coat or a sandwich, what good is that? You've been worse than useless. Faith that doesn't express itself in compassionate action is obviously dead — no use to anyone."

Oh no! That means, if we're a followers of Jesus, and setting out into our communities in his name, that we too have to take action when we see injustice, poverty and need.

I'm not sure if I'm very good at the last bit. Being quietly supportive of an idea is different to actually changing my behaviour, potentially putting myself into awkward conversations, or spending my own money or time to help out.

James identifies these actions as coming from a place of love - mercy beats judgement every time! If we are seeing the world through Jesus eyes, with love, then our actions follow as a natural consequence of that. Prayer helps here, and so does being part of a community, where we can all shoulder part of the load and together accomplish more than we can by ourselves.

And, actually, our church has a pretty good track record with this sort of stuff. Look at our support of The Way, over near the mall. And the time and effort put into Lunch on the Hill. I was utterly captivated with Lynn's report back from her visit to Lesvos - and deeply moved that she cares so much for people that others have written off as a threat or inconvenience. Thank God for you Lynn! Actions following on from love.

So much need, and yet there are people prepared to roll up their sleeves and get stuck in. There are a lot of people in this Parish who go above and beyond to respond to the needs they see around them. It's heart-warming, beautiful and again, I'm proud to be a part of this community.

But, as much as we are doing there is always still work to do.

By way of example I'm going to run over just one issue that's been floating around in my mind for a while, I see it in the news and on Facebook. Especially after watching the events in the US recently. It's an issue we can ALL get involved in, in small ways, and in fact we are the best people to tackle it.

New Zealand has a history, and like it or not, our society is set up to suit people like me. Look at me - I tick quite a lot of boxes. I'm pakeha, I'm male, I'm university educated, I'm middle class. About the only gold star I don't get as a Kiwi is that I've never played rugby. So I pretty much move through a world set up for me. There's not a lot of resistance there. The education system suited my way of learning. The leave structures in my various jobs have been set up to suit my culture and festivals. The way I interact with various government structures is easy and familiar to me.

But if you're Maori, or from the Pacific Islands, life in New Zealand isn't quite so cozy. Relative to the general population, Maori & Pacific Islanders typically show higher rates of unemployment, obesity, and incarceration, lower rates of educational achievement, and poorer access to health care. Maori and Pacific Islanders are disproportionately represented in poverty stats too.

And I'm not going to go all 19th century and say it's in their breeding or whatever, because that is utter rubbish. I know a rigged system when I see it.

Here's a very small example - A tangi is a completely different thing to a funeral - Tangi take days, and it's very important to be there representing your whanau and showing respect for the person who has died. Most employment leave structures can't cope with it. The rules at my previous job were that I was allowed a day off to attend a funeral, but only if the person was related to me - a grandparent or closer. Asking to take 5 days off for a Tangi wasn't in the flowchart. I've heard of people being labelled as lazy by their employer for trying to take so much time off, just so they can travel to a tangi and do what's required in their culture. And it might seem like a trifling, insignificant thing, but it's an example of where our respective cultures run up against each other - guess which one wins.

If you're Maori life can be a consent struggle as you are forced to fit, square peg-like into pakeha culture.

Day to day, I personally don't even really see it. I just carry on living, not realising I'm in a position of privilege. It's like the old joke about the two young fish, hanging out on the reef and an old fish comes up to them and says, hey guys - how's the water? And one of the young fish turns to the other and says "what the hell is water?"

We can't see what we're immersed in all the time.

I want to show you this - apologies for the audio quality: [video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QdmdC2Ud9j0>]

I think I can make a case, based on our readings today, along with what we know about Jesus from the gospels and say that we should be playing our part in exposing our invisible privilege, and by exposing it, help find a way to neutralise it.

Does that sound scary?

I guess in some ways it is, but you know what? We are absolutely the best people to talk to other middle-class pakeha people about the injustice faced by Maori and others in our society.

Human beings like to divide the world up into "people like me" and "others". It's an unconscious thing, and something that kept us safe in our stone-age, tribal days. People are more likely to listen to someone that comes from the "people like me" group. This means that speaking to your neighbour or your friend and calling them out over a thoughtless comment or lazy attitude will carry a load more impact than if it came from someone Maori, for example.

So while we can't take the issue on in its entirety, we can do little bits here and there to extend God's justice and love, advocating for anyone who doesn't share our privileged position.

Like in our reading this morning. Jesus was someone on the same level as the religious leaders. It wouldn't have mattered how correct and eloquent the woman was, they wouldn't have listened to her, would they?

But operating in a completely different fashion to her accusers, Jesus took on the issue, solving it in a way that showed love for the woman, but also for the religious leaders. He didn't crush them with legal arguments. He gave them the opportunity to see their behaviour for what it was, and they abandoned their actions.

One final point - when we say that we go in the name of Christ, we're not agreeing to that on an individual basis.

It's a corporate statement isn't it? We don't say 'I' go in the name of Christ, we say WE go. We're in this together.

In 2009, on the Nomad podcast, Bishop and author Tom Wright was asked what Christian Community means to him. This was his reply:

"It's really impossible to be a Christian all by yourself. Well maybe not impossible. There are one or two brave souls who are called to do that either on the mission field or as hermits.

But for the great majority of people we need that companionship of ten or a dozen people who we really have very few secrets from. And who we can pray with, and share with about anything. We share their life and pilgrimage, and they ours.

But we also need to be part of that significantly larger group. Fifty, sixty, seventy, or eighty, where we can actually say;

"Now here we have a responsibility to our local larger community, our local town, our local government. What's happening about asylum seekers where we are? What's happening to people who are caught by the credit crunch where we are? What can we, as a community, actually do to be involved to help people where they are, to bring the saving and healing rule of Jesus Christ on Earth as in Heaven. Some of us can do little bits of that by ourselves, most of us need to do that in company with others.

So the mission is the primary thing, and the inner life of the church must follow from that. But for the mission you need a moderately substantial community so that you can be sure you really are addressing the key issues with wisdom and not just firing off salvos from a position of relative ignorance.

The Christian community is, when it's working, one of the loveliest things there is, and the sense of the presence of God, the presence of the Holy Spirit, and the love of Jesus in that community, rooted in the sacraments and meeting around scripture and getting on with the job in the world - this is what it's all about."

Tom Wright's picture is a good one. A smaller group working together to bring the love of Christ to those in our larger community.

It's the love of Jesus that brings us together here on the Hill this morning, and it's the love of Jesus that allows us to love our neighbours. Together we can push out into our local community, sticking up for people, providing sandwiches, friendship and advocacy for those who need us.

All done in the name of Christ.

By way of a closing prayer, I have that reading from Corinthians, the one we normally hear at weddings, but re-written as a poem. It's called 1 Corinthians 13 for Peacemakers.

If I speak about courage and justice, and siding with the oppressed, and speaking truth to power no matter the cost, but do not speak about love... I am just a loudmouth orator, a white saviour, a shameless self-promoter.

If I am excellent at nonviolent communication, and I take great pictures, and I know all the latest anti-oppressive lingo, and I can analyse racist systems so as to dismantle them entirely, but have not love, I am nothing.

If I fully embrace the work of prophet and activist and martyr, and get dragged away by the riot police or bombed by the military of my own country, but have not love, that is no use to anyone.

Love is patient. Love survives evil, war, oppression. It remains when the teargas clears and the children go back to school. It is still there when the water is protected. Love is kind, not arrogant, not insisting on its own way, but making space for joy and truth even in the hardest circumstance.

Whether it is love between two people, or love of a person for their community, or love of a community for its land, or love of justice and peace and equity, love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.

Clever words will be forgotten. The most interesting facts are subject to revision. The best sermon you've ever heard – you will forget. Right now, everything we do is flawed and inaccurate. But. One day we'll experience Truth with a Capital T. And then all this will be unnecessary.

Right now we're hearing murmurs, reading translations, seeing shadows on the wall, but one day we'll see face-to-face.

Right now, half of the time I'm guessing, but one day I will know beyond all doubt – and I will be fully known.

What remains when it is all stripped away is three things:

- Faith that the flawed world as we see it is not all that there is;
- Hope that the next generation will live in a better world;
- and Love to give us the strength and motivation to build it.

The greatest of these is Love

Amen