

Easter 5a
John 14:1-14

St Peter's Box Hill
April 20,2008

THE RELEVANCE OF CHRISTIANITY

On Friday afternoon I was privileged to preach at the Funeral of one of my mentors. Archbishop Robert Dann who had died the previous week at the age of ninety three years. That nigh on a century life has seen some profound changes within the life of our society and church. The Anglican Church in particular and the Christian Church in general has moved from a central position in society

We come to a situation now where many would query the relevance and indeed sense of what we are doing this morning. Christianity they would claim has been discredited by the abuse of power by clergy and church leaders and made irrelevant by the advances of modernity.

I would like to encourage you to think again about this subject. Not unsurprisingly I would submit that Christianity is relevant as we face a new age. That it is not designed to be a monument to the past but primarily is a movement for the present and future. The gospel reading we have just read highlights a number of themes that indicate the relevance of Christianity and faith.

In particular I wish to focus upon three of them that are contained in one of those great statements of the New Testament, .the words of Jesus Christ who said;

" I am the way , and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the father except through me. (John 14:6)

These words make the audacious claim that Christianity is relevant because;

it offers a way to follow,

 a truth to believe,

 and a life to live

Another way of phrasing this is to say that it answers three basic questions about life.

Where are we going? -----a new sense of direction,

 Why we are here? --- a new sense of purpose for understanding life;

 and how we are to live --a new sense of energy.

Christianity is relevant because

(1) IT OFFERS A NEW SENSE OF DIRECTION.

--a way to follow.

Life in a post modern, technological age has become extra-ordinarily complex for so many people, and on occasions the complexities and pressures can weigh people down. It is sometimes said of political parties, football teams and even businesses that they have " lost their way ", that they have no sense of direction."

This can be tragically true for many families and individuals within our society today. It is also true for our Church as it faces a new age.

Christianity is relevant because it offers us a way to follow and a new sense of direction. The way of Jesus Christ offers us the opportunity of becoming more than a wanderer and invites us to join a journey and a pilgrimage.

It is primarily a journey of the Spirit..

It is a journey inward as we understand more about ourselves, our motives, our restlessness and our stirrings. It is a journey towards wholeness, fulfilment and potential which in one sense can only be started in this life and needs all of eternity to reach any sense of fulfilment.

The Christian journey is an act of will taken on in response to the love of God made known to us in Jesus Christ.

It is an inner journey to the very depths of our being; and yet at the same time is an outer journey --to others, to our world and to our God.

Unless we can get the mix of inner and outer right we are going to be off-balance and wandering.

That has become part of the dilemma of the contemporary church. There are voices who claim that the way forward is the path of spirituality and inner quest. Forget about action and social reform, concentrate upon prayer, spirituality and meditation.

On the other hand there are the voices of social justice who claim that the relevance of Christianity will become clear as we deal with the pressing issues of poverty, global debt, global warming climate change and economic imbalance within our nation.

The reality is that they are both right and both wrong. Social action needs the inner journey of the spirit if it is to have the energy to survive and the resources with which to face those who oppose us. The inner life of spirituality can become an escape from the world and a distortion of the gospel unless it is combined with the outer journey towards others. Social action and spiritual direction become self-defeating unless they are integrated in a mission of evangelism- of sharing our faith in Christ with others

Christianity is relevant --because it offers a new sense of direction.
Jesus Christ - the way to follow.
Christianity is relevant because it offers

(2) A NEW SENSE OF PURPOSE.

Ultimately truth is not a matter of listing a series of propositions to which you are called to give intellectual assent. Truth gives meaning and purpose to life, and that is what Jesus meant in that audacious claim, "*I am the way and the truth*"

Nearly twelve years ago occurred that terrible human tragedy of the massacre at Port Arthur. This event has had a profound effect upon the psyche and soul of most Australians. Listening to several talk-back shows over the past few days indicate that it still raises recurring questions on how we can make any sense of it. The utter meaninglessness of it all is an integral aspect of the tragedy.

Even those who see this and similar human tragedies as evidence that there is no meaning or purpose to life - by their very questioning, anger and bewilderment bear witness to the fact that deep down they believe that life ought to have a meaning or purpose.

This makes the claim of Jesus to be the Truth all the more dynamic and powerful. He is not offering a crash course in philosophy.--rather he is making the audacious claim that he is the one who shows us the truth about God and life. This claim affirms that however else we may seek to describe God -- that God is always Christlike. Christianity does not offer a slick philosophical answer to all the pain and mystery of suffering. Rather it invites us to accept the promise of one who walks alongside us in our fear, pain or despair. "*Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil --for Thou art with me.*" (*Psalm 23*)

Jesus Christ reveals the truth to us that life comes from God, and can only find its full meaning and purpose when it is lived in the light of that truth. That life is going to God -the one who loves us unconditionally, offers us his presence in our life now and will receive us at the end.

Christianity --faith and belief does have relevance because it offers us --a new direction to life,

a new sense of purpose.

Finally because it invites us to share

(3) A LIFE TO LIVE.

That is part of the meaning of this Easter season. The Easter gospels point to a number of signs that Jesus Christ is risen. The narratives of the empty tomb, the appearances of the risen Jesus to his followers and their transformation from defeated people into a community of disciples who risked their lives to share the message that Jesus Christ is alive and is the world's ruler. We can point to a number of other signs- prayer, sacraments and the experience many people have today of the presence of the risen Christ in their lives. On Friday I was able to point to the example of Archbishop Bob Dann who allowed the aliveness of Jesus to permeate his life.

It is this aliveness that provides the energy and power to live as Christians. But Christianity is not just about the life of Jesus back there. Rather it is the audacious offer that as we live our lives according to his purpose and respond to life and others as he would; we too can discover that he is no name buried in a book but that he is alive in and is living through us.

Like many of you I have not always found it easy to embody this new life. Our fears, and self- centredness can so easily get in the road, and when you add on some of the obscenities of existence it may even seem an impossible task. Yet I have discovered over the years that on the occasions when I have responded to life like Jesus Christ ;I have become aware that he is indeed the life to live and is in fact living through me..

As a youth I learnt a gospel chorus which went like this;
“You ask me how I know he lives?”

He lives within my heart.”

Twenty seven years as a bishop, forty three years as a priest and seventy two years of living indicate to me that Jesus claim and promise in the gospel this morning is a good access point to all this.

He is the way to follow,
the truth to believe
and the life to live.