

### 3rd Sunday Trinity

Genesis 21.8-21; Romans 6:1-11

Matthew 10:24-39

25th June 2023

*May I speak in the name of God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.*

To be a pilgrim is to step into the known-unknown; no matter how familiar you might be with the way before you, or how thoroughly you might have made your preparations, when you commit yourself to stepping out in faith to encounter the untamed divine freedom of God you step out into the unknown; for God in his freedom is immeasurably greater than we can even begin to comprehend. And when we mortals encounter God, indeed dare to walk with God, our lives can change beyond anything we might have anticipated.

The longer I'm here amongst you the more you'll detect a fondness for Tolkien's Lord of the Rings, but the quote from Bilbo to his nephew Frodo captures this sense wonderfully: "It's a dangerous business, Frodo, going out your door. You step onto the road, and if you don't keep

your feet there's no knowing where you'll be swept off to."

This is true for us in so many ways. There are so many doors in our lives that we can step through; physical and personal choices we make each and every day, and beyond them we may well have plans and expectations but life has a knack of throwing the unexpected at us. Sometimes surprises can be satisfying. You find yourself in the post office bumping into a friend you haven't seen in years and are immediately transported back to memories of people and places which at one time made up so much of your life. It's a small world after all. Maybe you'll receive a positive email about work or good family news. Perhaps you'll have the serendipity of every single traffic light turning green as you approach, making your journey in record time.

Yet traffic lights can turn red. Emails can be frustrating, and chance encounters with the awkward neighbour or unwelcome in-laws can derail our days.

Stepping through doors can be a dangerous business.

Indeed, my fellow pilgrims, this morning we have each stepped through the doors of the Church and have been confronted by some difficult scriptures.

Hagar, the slave woman spurned by the man to whom she had been given by his wife, collapses in tears in the wilderness; sorrowful for the impending death of her son Ishamael.

Paul, writing as succinctly as he can, uses a few words to express weighty and powerful realities which even a shelf load of books are unable to fully unpack, such is the richness of his nuanced yet bold proclamations.

Jesus, the one whom when we look upon his face we see the revelation of God himself, speaks uncompromisingly of judgement, hell, division, and even of losing our lives.

Perhaps it was a mistake to come today, perhaps this was a door through which we should not have walked?

And yet, the door through which we have walked together has shown us the reality of the world through which we each have travelled ourselves.

More than this, if we have eyes with which to see and ears with which to hear we might notice that we are not the only ones who step through the doors; for God himself passes through and onto these difficult paths which we walk.

Hagar's son's cries are heard by the Lord, and an Angel opens her eyes and shows her a well of water. They are saved, and God was with the boy as he grew up.

Jesus' words, listened to carefully, are words which recognise the darkness of the world around his disciples but offers genuine hope within it; *So have no fear [of those who malign you and me]<sup>1</sup>; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops.*

*Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground unperceived by your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.*

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<sup>1</sup> Summarising v.24-25

These scenes reveal to us the familiar yet all too often underappreciated reality of the Twenty Third psalm:

*Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff comfort me. (v.4)*

No matter how dark and difficult the path may be, 'faith tells us that no matter what lies ahead of us, God is already there'.<sup>2</sup> This is the significance of Jesus' words in today's Gospel reading; the World may hate you, but it hates you because it hates him and rather than Jesus leaving you alone he will be right there with you - all you have to do is continue to acknowledge him before others, for everyone who acknowledges Jesus before others Jesus will also acknowledge before his Father in heaven (M10:32). That is, Jesus is praying for us and rooting for us to succeed in our pilgrimages through life as we take up our crosses and follow him.

This should encourage us as we head out through the Church doors back into the world; we recognise that the world at large and within the confines of our own lives

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<sup>2</sup> Source, unknown - but given to me as a simple poster by Professor Graham McFarlane in 2015.

can be filled with troubles and adversities. With Constantine we sally forth, confident of conquering the world by the power of the cross.

Yet the Cross is not simply an emblematic talisman of victory against our enemies. Rather it is the essential medicine which restores our souls by the blood of Christ such that we can have victory over a far more significant foe; the powers of sin and death within our very selves.

It is of this that Paul writes in Romans 6, where he addresses the reality of Sin for all human beings. It is common these days to think of sin as moral failings of varying degrees, and even more common it seems to think that these moral failings are understandable and because they can be understood they can be explained and by being explained they can be explained away. Yet explaining away is not the same as forgiveness; and although moral failings are sins, sin is more than simply our moral failings. It is the seemingly inevitable and barely perceptible engine of entropic decay which results from reality not being rightly aligned with its divine creator.

That is, with the fall of Adam, all of creation was spiritually knocked off kilter and is continually drifting through decay towards its total dissolution and destruction.

And this affects all of creation to such an extent that we can no more force ourselves into alignment than we can change the orbit of the earth around the sun by jumping up and down, even all of us at the same time.

Sin in this sense is like a kind of spiritual gravity which seeks always to tempt us to lower our gaze from Jesus to focus on our own lives and issues. The law therefore was put in place to enable people to seek God's face by being aligned with his heart, and journeying with him all their days.

Even so this did not undo the influence and consequence of sin; namely in Adam all entered the way which decays into death.

Rather than accepting this, God has always sought to provide a pathway for restoration, a healing not just for humanity but for all creation; for reality itself to be put back on its proper foundation, secured by his own love.

As such God stepped through the most amazing of doors onto the most deadly of paths; God himself was born as a baby boy to a virgin called Mary, and grew up to be Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah. Jesus walked, he talked, he healed and he taught. He prayed and he proclaimed the Good News that the Kingdom of Heaven is close at hand. Then he was arrested under the cover of darkness. Unjustly accused and sentenced to death upon the cross, he walked a lonely road with conviction. As he was nailed to the beams of wood and lifted high, the full weight of sin, both our collective moral failings which draw us away from the heart of God but also the angst of a creation which had had its bones broken and healed out of place, the full weight of sin, of death and selfish glee of the devil hung upon him. Yet even then it could not claim him, for we read in the scriptures that Christ gave up his spirit and submitted himself even to death upon the cross.

In that moment it seemed as though even the fullness of God was insufficient to restore creation. It was a moment which lingered three painful days until in the tomb where Jesus was laid, his dead heart began once again to beat with a rhythm which has danced unceasingly ever

since; with a gasp he took in the first breath of new life and emerged from the tomb, witnessed only by the angels.

He lives now a life beyond decay, which shall never again be touched by the stain of death. In that moment he was established as the single unifying point of all reality, tipping the balance such that all creation now groans with the birthpangs of the New Creation. Jesus is the eternally living and present one who pours out God's love into our hearts by the presence of the Holy Spirit so that we too may taste the first fruits of this new creation, this undoing of death and decay and experience the promise of eternal life: free from sin; freed to glorify God and enjoy him forever.

And so Paul writes:

*Do you not know that all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? 4 Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.*

*5 For if we have been united with him in a death like his,*

*we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. 6 We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. 7 For whoever has died is freed from sin. 8 But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. 9 We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. 10 The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. 11 So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. (6:3-11)*

“And so you must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God Christ Jesus”.

Or, as Jesus says in John 10:9: *I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture. (NKJV)*

Let us therefore reflect afresh on our faith, and choose to come to the Lord's table, stepping out in faith to known-unknown; knowing that the one who loves us calls us into his presence, and curious to see how his love will change us and our lives... forever.  
Amen.