

MINISTRY RESOURCES FOR SUNDAY 7 FEBRUARY 2021

This service was prepared initially for the St Stephen's Tuesday congregation, which resumed for the new year on 2 February; then adapted for the congregation at Strathfield-Homebush Uniting Church, a congregation which I have only visited once before, several years ago. The SHUC congregation is in a time of ministerial vacancy, and is awaiting a Supply Minister to be appointed in the interim.

1 Prayers of Adoration and Confession

Psalm 147 1:11, 20c

Praise the LORD!

How good it is to sing praises to our God;
for he is gracious, and a song of praise is fitting.

*The LORD builds up Jerusalem;
he gathers the outcasts of Israel.*

He heals the brokenhearted,
and binds up their wounds.

*He determines the number of the stars;
he gives to all of them their names.*

Great is our Lord, and abundant in power;
his understanding is beyond measure.

*The LORD lifts up the downtrodden;
he casts the wicked to the ground.*

Sing to the LORD with thanksgiving;
make melody to our God on the lyre.

*He covers the heavens with clouds,
prepares rain for the earth,
makes grass grow on the hills.*

He gives to the animals their food,
and to the young ravens when they cry.

*His delight is not in the strength of the horse,
nor his pleasure in the speed of a runner;*

but the LORD takes pleasure in those who fear him,
in those who hope in his steadfast love.

Praise the LORD.

God of all mercy,
we know that we are sinners,
that there is much evil in us, and little good,
that we hide in dark corners, for fear of your blessed light.
Give us grace today to make a fresh start.
We know that we have not loved you
with our whole heart,
nor have we loved our neighbour as ourselves.
As we hope to be forgiven,
teach us how to forgive;
and lead us forward in a new life
where neither grudges
nor resentment have a part;
teach us the power of reconciliation,
not only to heal others,
but to heal ourselves.

We ask these things in the name of Jesus, our Saviour,
Amen

2 **Declaration of Forgiveness**

If we deny that we are sinners,
we place a barrier between ourselves and God's grace.
When we acknowledge our sins,
that barrier falls away.
We meet God face to face as we truly are,
and we are assured that he will not condemn us,
but will forgive us.
For this reason, Christ died, and Christ rose.
Hear then Christ's word of grace to us:
Our sins are forgiven.
Thanks be to God.

3 **Bible Readings –**

Mark 1:29-39
I Corinthians 9:16-23

4 **Sermon:** See below

5 **Prayers of the People and Lord's Prayer**

Father, our prayers today are for the year that lies ahead of us.
We pray first for this congregation of your people,
facing a ministerial vacancy after the closure of Moni's ministry here.
We pray for the JNC and the oversight of the Presbytery,
in the quest for the right man or woman to minister in this place.
We pray also for ourselves
for those who are present today, or who are participating with us remotely;
and we for those who are prevented by circumstance from joining us,
We pray that the time will come soon, when we can meet together in safety,
without fear of the pandemic that has so disrupted our lives.
Yet we give you thanks for the technologies,
and the personalities, who have kept us together during the past difficult year.
We pray for any of our number who are ill or troubled or fearful,
that you will be their comforter and their sustainer.
As we pray for our own congregation, Father,
we pray too for our neighbours –
for our Anglican, Catholic and Chinese Christian sisters and brothers.
May the power of the gospel be spoken through each of their congregations
in the year ahead.
We lift our eyes beyond our own locality,
and we pray for our city of Sydney, and its widely flung suburbs,
that 2021 will see it continue to be so mercifully spared from the pandemic;
that businesses will return to prosperity
so that jobs may restore to people their livelihoods and their dignity,
and that community life will be able soon to resume
in a way that satisfies our deep desire to be together.
We pray too for a fairer community to emerge from the pandemic,
one in which homelessness is addressed with compassion,
where unemployment or poverty or disadvantage is not stigmatised,

where all of us prioritise the public good,
and seek to love our neighbours as ourselves.
We pray for our governments,
for the NSW Government and our Premier, Gladys Berejiklian;
for our Federal Government, and our Prime Minister, Scott Morrison;
and for our various local governments.
We pray that they will be wise, prudent, just and compassionate in all they do,
and that they will always eschew political advantage
and govern with integrity and only for the good of the community.
Father, as we look beyond the pandemic,
may we seek to build a better world, and not return to the prison of the past.
In particular, may this be the year when not only we, but the entire world,
are galvanised into urgent and dramatic action
to address the grave dangers facing our planet.
As we listened to the wise and learned voices of scientists during the pandemic,
may we listen with the same respect and openness
about the far greater danger facing our ravaged and groaning Earth.
May we be able, at the end of this new year,
to look back on courageous and determined action on our environment.
May we also be able to say
that the year saw more declarations of peace than of war.
May we be able to say that the world is a measurably better place
than when this year began.

Our father in heaven,
Hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come;
Your will be done
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread,
and forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil,
for the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
now and forever.
Amen

5 **Blessing and Dismissal**

*I have become all things to all people,
that I might by all means save some.*

Thus wrote Paul to the Church in Corinth.
So go from this place,
to be all things to all people,
for the sake of the gospel.
Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.
The blessing of almighty God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
be with you now and abide with you ever more.
Amen

SERMON

The word “hypocrisy” is not new. Our English word ultimately derives from an ancient Greek word that means to “pretend”. So the apostle Paul would have known the word, and so would the people of the Greek city of Corinth to whom he was writing. According to www.dictionary.com, a hypocrite is

a person who pretends to have virtues, moral or religious beliefs, principles, etc., that he or she does not actually possess, especially a person whose actions belie stated beliefs.

“Hypocrite” an ugly word. None of us wants to be called a hypocrite. In public life, we have grown sick of hypocrites, people who tell us one thing while they secretly do quite the opposite. They’re the politicians who think the Coronavirus restrictions don’t apply to them. They’re the public transport advocates who drive everywhere in their four-wheel drives. They’re the high-profile preachers who get found out for stealing from the collection, or cheating on their marriage partners. They’re the moral crusaders who denounce the gay or transgender community, only to be caught in a gay bar, or outed by a spurned same-sex partner.

You know what I mean. “Hypocrite” is an ugly word.

When we read the passage from I Corinthians set for this week, it’s hard not to summon up the word “hypocrisy” in relation to what Paul says of himself. “I have become all things to all people,” he says – a Jew to the Jews, a law-keeper to the law-keepers, someone who is weak for the weak.

In the previous chapter, Paul had been writing about meat that had been given as a sacrifice to a pagan god. While he makes it very clear that he believed all foods were okay for Christians, including meat that had been offered up to non-existent gods, he instructs the Corinthians to be sensitive in what they eat to the beliefs of others. If you’re with someone who will be offended by your eating meat that had been offered to a pagan god, then don’t do it – even though it’s actually an okay thing to do. Modify your behaviour to accommodate the feelings and beliefs of others, he says. Putting that into practice himself, it would have been quite possible for Paul to dine with two different Christian families in Corinth on consecutive nights. One family happily ate the meat they’d bought at the market, which had previously been sacrificed to one of the pagan gods – and Paul would give them his blessing and join in their meal. The other family believed that such meat was unclean, even blasphemous, and ate only vegetables and grain foods – and Paul wouldn’t argue with them. He’d give them his blessing and join in their meal too. If the two families compared notes, they would certainly have wondered what Paul really believed. How could he appear to have one belief here, and another there? It would hardly be surprising if the word “hypocrite” entered their conversation.

In our passage today, we find Paul very happily acknowledging that he has been “all things to all people”. He has adapted himself to every different situation, apparently taking on completely contradictory positions, depending on the circumstances. So what are *we* to make of Paul’s apparently inconsistent behaviour? And why was he so up front about it to the Christians in Corinth? Genuine hypocrites (if that’s not an oxymoron) – genuine hypocrites aren’t usually so open about their behaviour. They say one thing in public, and do another thing in secret. We’re not likely to hear a philandering minister proudly proclaim,

To my wife, I become as one who is faithful; to the other women in my life, I become as one who is faithless to all. I am different things to different women.

Yet it’s something very like that that Paul has to say in our passage. Listen to the words again:

To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.

There are two important things to say about this passage, and I think they exonerate Paul from the charge of hypocrisy.

The first point is to remind ourselves of the importance of context. Modern-day politicians try to get away with saying the most heinous things by claiming they were taken out of context. Context can be used as a slippery excuse to get you out of trouble when you've been caught out saying something that's embarrassing. But context *is* important. It's particularly important when we read a passage from the Bible. When we see any biblical passage, the first thing we should do is to take in the context. Read the couple of chapters before and after, to see where the passage fits in. That's especially true in Paul's longer letters, because he constructs intricate and detailed arguments that range over a number of chapters. It's unfair to Paul, and unfair to ourselves, to take just a bit of it out of its context, and draw too many conclusions from it – especially if they are negative conclusions about Paul himself.

Now the context of today's passage is about Paul's rights as an apostle, and the fact that he has not exercised his rights so as to be a more powerful witness. He begins by asserting that ministers of the gospel are entitled to be supported by those to whom they minister; yet he declares that he has never sought support from the people in Corinth. In fact, he says that he'd rather *die* than have the Corinthian church support him. He has, he says, *given up* all his rights so that he can proclaim the gospel without any impediments. That way he is a free agent, under no obligation to anyone, and that leaves him completely free to preach the good news.

Indeed, he goes on, he even sacrificed his freedom for the sake of the gospel. While he is fully convinced that the Jewish Law does not apply to followers of Jesus, he has made himself as one who *is* under the Law, who is *not* free, so that he can proclaim the gospel to people who believe they are under the Law. And the same thing for people who are completely outside the Law – Gentiles. He has acted as if he had no obligations at all under the Law, again, so that he can proclaim the gospel to the Gentiles. So, in the passage we're looking at, Paul is not outing himself for inconsistency; what he's saying is that he has sacrificed even his freedom of action, even his freedom to *be* who he is convinced he should be – that is, he has allowed himself to be “enslaved” to the beliefs of others – just so that he can be a more effective minister to the various people of different beliefs he encounters.

When we read Paul's declaration in that context, it takes on a very different meaning. This passage really is a case where taking some words out of context can be very misleading.

And that leads to the second point about this passage. A hypocrite's motive is to appear to be one thing, while secretly indulging themselves in being something else. It's completely self-serving. It's a secret – something they really don't want to get out. But Paul is not like that. Paul is completely up front with the Corinthians about what he is doing, because what he's doing is not about *him*. It's about *them*. It's so that he can be a more effective minister to them; indeed, as Paul puts it very frankly, it's so that he can save as many of them as he can. Paul is like the school teacher who will do whatever it takes to help her different students to learn something. One method for that child, something different for that one, something different again for that one. The motive is about the

child and their wellbeing – as Paul’s motive is about the disparate believers in Corinth, and their salvation.

It that’s hypocrisy, may we all become hypocrites!

We often worry about how we can discharge our duty to proclaim the gospel. The place from which we start, the kind of language we use, the concepts that are fundamental to our understanding of the saving work of Jesus, are all so alien to the 21st century world around us. How on earth do we talk about forgiveness to people who have no concept of sin – indeed who reject and resent the very notion of their accountability to any divine being? How do we even get started with a conversation with such people about the gospel?

Surely Paul gives us a good starting point. Paul got in beside the people to whom he wanted to preach. He accepted them for whom they were and where they were. He didn’t debate them about the things with which he disagreed. To quibble about doctrine, to argue the point about particular issues, would only create conflict and disharmony. It would put up barriers between Paul and those to whom he sought to minister.

Instead, Paul remained silent on such matter. He chose a very different, and more promising and fruitful path. He surrendered his own freedom to be who he was. He allowed himself to be “enslaved” by those he wanted to assist. He met them where they were. He became “all things to all people”. He did this “for the sake of the gospel”. It’s not a bad starting point for us to think about too, in our own ministry.

Because the ministry to which we are called is about giving of ourselves, about surrendering everything for the sake of Christ and the gospel. Paul gave up his freedom, perhaps (you might say) his identity. Because at the heart of the gospel that he, and we, proclaim is the self-giving of Jesus himself. Jesus did not just give up his freedoms and his identity. Jesus gave up his very life. He allowed himself to be enmeshed in all the hatred and bitterness that the world could muster. He was surrounded by those who hated and feared him, who accused and convicted him, who flogged him and taunted him and spat on him, who murdered him in the most excruciating and humiliating manner they knew. Jesus gave his everything for the very people who took his life from him.

But we know the end of the story – that Jesus’ death was not the end, but the gateway to new life. To proclaim that gospel, Paul surrendered his freedom and his identity. If that lay him open to charges of hypocrisy, may we all become hypocrites. May we all have the urgency and the passion for the gospel that Paul had. May we all become “all things to all people” for the sake of the gospel!

Amen