

'How do we, in the New Year and beyond ... Live the Good Life?'

St Paul's Presbyterian Church, Napier. 29 January 2023 Epiphany 3

Opening Sentences for the Gathering: Psalm 15

Who may be a guest in the sacred space? Who may live on the holy hill? ²Whoever lives a blameless life, does what is right, and speaks honestly. ³Who does not slander, or do harm to others, or insult their neighbour. The one who makes firm commitments and does not renege on promises who does not charge interest when lending money. who does not take bribes to testify against the innocent. The one who lives like this will never be shaken.

Readings for the Gathering

Micah 6: 1-8

The divine one has a case against the people; a dispute with Israel! ³"My people, how have I wronged you? How have I wearied you? Answer me! ⁴In fact, I brought you up from the land of Egypt; I delivered you from that place of slavery. I sent Moses, Aaron, and Miriam to lead you... Recall how you journeyed from Shittim to Gilgal, so you might acknowledge that you have been treated fairly." ⁶With what should I enter the holy presence? With what should I bow before the divine? Should I enter the sacred presence with burnt offerings, with year-old calves? ⁷Will the Holy One accept a thousand rams or ten thousand streams of olive oil? Should I give my firstborn child as payment for my rebellion, my offspring—my own flesh and blood—for my sin? ⁸You have been told, O human beings, what is good, and what the Holy One really wants from you to carry out justice, love mercy, and to walk humbly before your God.

I Corinthians 1: 26-31

²⁶Think about the circumstances of your call, brothers and sisters. Not many were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were born to a privileged position. ²⁷But what the world thinks foolish was chosen to shame the wise, and what the world thinks weak was chosen to shame the strong. ²⁸What is low and despised in the world, what is regarded as nothing, has been chosen to set aside what is regarded as something, ²⁹so that no one can boast...

Matthew 5: 1-12 The Beatitudes

⁵When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain. After he sat down his disciples came to him. ²Then he began to teach them by saying: ³"Blessed are the poor in spirit for the kingdom of heaven belongs to them. ⁴"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. ⁵"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. ⁶"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied. ⁷"Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. ⁸"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. ⁹"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God. ¹⁰"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to them. ¹¹"Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you and say all kinds of evil things about you falsely on account of me. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, because your reward is great in heaven, for they persecuted the prophets before you in the same way.

Contemporary Reading Misogyny/Philogyny by Susan Jones

Being Woman in the World Garside Publishing 2022

The dictionary says the word is specific.
Misogyny specifically references a hatred of women.
Not a woman
not her over there, or her indoors,
or that other girl.
No, all of us. It is quite specific.
The word originates from two Greek words
Misein – to hate, *Gyne* – woman.
Both roots can be found in other words,

some common, some obscure.
Misogyny is common, but not obscure.
It is specific.
I am woman. I am hated.
Let's make a new word.
Let's take the root for love – *phil*,
Make a new word:- *philogyny*.
Let's make that common and not obscure.
It can be specific too.
I am woman. I am loved.

Reflection for the Gathering

What do I mean in the title for this reflection by 'The Good Life'? I'm not referring to the TV programme I used to watch as a teenager. That one where Richard Briers and Felicity Kendal acted an idealistic young couple turning their suburban lot into a self-sufficiency allotment. Much to the dismay of their more affluent neighbours! There was much good they were trying to do. When you think about it, that programme was a ahead of its time, encouraging a more carbon friendly lifestyle.

Nor am I referring to a playboy or playgirl style of life with diamonds dripping from ears and circling the neck projecting blingy wealth or luxury homes cocooning the rich in the comfort to which they intend to become accustomed.

I'm talking about knowing what is good to do. We could be fancy and call it orthopraxis. Ortho = good and praxis = practice. Like orthodoxy, Ortho=good, doxy=thinking. Or we could stick with doing good or doing the right thing.

We see little of what is truly 'good' on television news. There is the occasional heroic rescue. TV One has its 'good sorts' piece at the end of the news highlighting otherwise unsung local heroes. Unfortunately, the 'good' is often the object of ridicule and vitriol in recent times. The compassionate advice to 'be kind' issued by the prime minister at the beginning of the pandemic has become a source of irritation when actually, it is needed more than ever. I saw a sign in a café this week which said. "We are understaffed, please be kind to the staff who have shown up." As we all recover from an unprecedented worldwide catastrophe which has a very big sting in its tail, we need kindness more than ever.

Our attention has been drawn to the political scene this past week with the changeover between prime ministers and announcement of the election date. What does ortho praxis, doing good look like politically?

Our reading from Matthew 5 could be thought of as Jesus' political manifesto. Jesus' sermon on the Mount would be a good yardstick to see if real life manifestos we hear from political parties later this year, will lead to a truly good life for all New Zealanders.

Who are those whom Jesus prioritises in his political policies? ³ *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers.”*

I guess that would mean when Jesus’ political party won the election, we would see more resourcing of mental health programmes, greater victim support, education in less aggressive ways of dealing with each other, rewards for those doing good rather than focusing only on those doing bad things, encouragement of complex, interesting but wholesome drama, movies and TV series, as well as support for anti-bullying and peace-making programmes in schools and workplaces. Perhaps instead of the King’s Birthday Honours we might have the Kindness Honours.

Does that idea not excite you? Perhaps, then, we have slowly absorbed the general cynical opinion that ‘good’ means moralistic or sentimental Hallmark card moments or namby-pamby goody-two-shoe behaviour.

In fact, to do the good or the right thing is incredibly, incredibly difficult. We have just seen an example of that in our previous prime minister’s service to the country. She did her duty by the Labour party and the country first by stepping up in difficult circumstances and then by stepping down when she knew she could not carry on.

Who helped her in doing that difficult job? Even among those who may have voted for her, how many shut down their friends or neighbours when they called her Cindy or Aunty Cindy, belittling her position? I noticed when former Prime Minister Shipley was asked to comment on the vitriol being received by women politicians, she referred to Prime Minister Ardern and Prime Minister Clark, making sure we did not forget that they carried the highest elected office in the land.

The reason women politicians get more resistance and opposition than male politicians is due to the dualistic lists we looked at last week. Last week’s emphasis on those was quite timely – maybe spirit led? Taking note of the Corinthians passage for today, God chooses the weak to confound the wise and arrogant. On the so-called ‘bad’ list we find things which the world considers weak and so dismisses them, denigrating anyone on that side of the divide between ‘in’ and ‘out’.

Good	Bad	Hate	love
Men	women	Discipline	compassion
Adult	children	Public	private
Mind	body	White	black
Rational	irrational	Straight	gay
Rich	poor	Leader	follower
Tough	kind	In	out

I said last week these lists were good news for white straight males, but actually they are caught in the dualism trap as much as women are. There's an impossible list of qualities here on the left-hand side implicitly demanded of any person born male in our western societies. They 'have to' make everything 'great again' for example. They 'have to' be the successful provider and the brains behind the business and the family. They 'have to' be the leader in public and private.

The mistake we make is not only the labelling of these two lists good and bad, as I said last week, but also the mistake of those on the good list feeling they are *entitled* to everything on that list and that others are barred from them. The specific case I am thinking of is the prime ministership – that used to be thought of as a job for men only, then life changed with the revolution of the 80s, yet still some men and some women see that role as only for men. So they vilify the unfortunate female who gets elected as PM.

I struck this myself years ago in education. You remember when the top three jobs in a school were Principal, Deputy Principal and Senior Mistress? Those positions were usually held by two men and a woman in the senior Mistress position. Then, the third ranked position was made a senior master/mistress position. In some schools this meant there were three men in the top positions. That was so at Menzies College, Wyndham before I went there. I was appointed Snr Mistress to follow a Snr Master, a long-serving, popular PE teacher. When I began teaching a Health class to sixth formers, I faced opposition and resistance. The 6th form dean enquired from one of the boys what was the problem. The student said 'Mrs Jones shouldn't have that job, it's a man's job.' He didn't know the history that in fact a job previously designated for women had been taken over by a man. He had only known a man in that position and now thought men were entitled to it. (Now the three positions are named Principal, Deputy and Associate Principal. It would be interesting to survey all

NZ high schools to find out what genders of leaders are occupying what positions in co-ed schools.)

The damage done in our time by the awful bullying of a woman prime minister is not just to her personally or her family. It is the effect it will have on young women thinking they might be suited to a life in politics because they want to contribute to their world by ensuring good policies are enacted. – whether of conservative or a more liberal nature. Why would such young women want to put themselves in harm's way or deliberately open themselves up to bullying online? For those of you who do not go on to online platforms like twitter or facebook or online news outlets, the onslaught on Prime Minister Ardern was tremendous much more than a few rude words called out of a crowd; it has been personal, crude and violent, threatening not only the prime minister herself but also her partner and child with crude acts and even death. It has come from young and old, women and men.

Recently a young girl wrote me a note during church. She wrote to SUZY, writing "Suzy's very brave to get up and talk in front of everyone." I thought when I first read it that I hoped as she grew up she would learn to talk in front of everyone and that she wouldn't have to be very brave to do it. I also wondered if she would have written that kind of note to a male minister or assumed he would automatically know he didn't need the same kind of courage?

I am known in the church for speaking up at Assemblies. I might have appeared confident in doing that, but it took many years of training, swallowing fear and planning speeches carefully. I would listen in postgraduate seminars for something I could ask a question about so that it wasn't only the male students asking questions. But that young girl was right, it takes courage to stand up every time to take a church service. Roger recognises the vibes as we drive to church. I hope that nervous tension adds to the energy and vitality of what happens in the service rather than detracts from it. Imagine then, the vastly greater pressure and responsibility that a prime minister of any gender carries and how crushing it must be to receive vitriol and violent, unintelligent messaging in response.

Jesus, on the other hand, lists groups of weakness in the beatitudes, all of which would appear on the bad side of these lists of dualisms. Surprisingly, he names

them as groups which will be blessed or happy. Misogyny, which targets one group – women- which is perceived in a dualistic society as being weak would not be acceptable in Jesus’ political party. In his home synagogue he provided another manifesto of his focus and priorities when he read from the prophet Isaiah. How would this go as an election speech?

Luke 4:16 He came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. He entered, as was his custom, into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read.

17 The book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. He opened the book, and found the place where it was written,

18 “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim release to the captives, recovering of sight to the blind, to deliver those who are crushed, 19 and to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.”

20 He closed the book, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fastened on him.

*21 He began to tell them, “**Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.**”*

See the parallels between the Beatitudes and Jesus’ proclamation of Isaiah 61, Jesus concern for the poor, the crushed and the brokenhearted?

If a political party today said its priorities were towards the poor, the crushed (or homeless) and the broken hearted or (abused and mentally ill), what would be the response from middle New Zealand? How many of you want our government to help us live that sort of Good Life, where those truly in need are prioritised top of the list, where homeless people get more assistance than super annuitants, where the mentally ill get more resources than the well-educated and successful? Think about how you would really feel about that.

A former parishioner in St Andrews on the Terrace, my last church, worked for the Benefit Rights Service in Wellington. The Service worked with beneficiaries to get the full payments they were entitled to under existing law. Graham said to Roger that he set his goal to get \$100,000 a year in entitlements of which beneficiaries had not been informed. He passed that total. That many benefits had been hidden by the government department. They had not been told the whole truth about what they were entitled to get from the government given their situation. Graham helped the beneficiaries to either advocate for

themselves or he would go with them to MSD or he would attend review hearings in court on their behalf. The Benefit Rights Service operates on the smell of an oily rag. That's the true measure of how important our society thinks it is to help the poor, the crushed and the broken-hearted.

One commentator says this about Jesus reading the Luke passage in the synagogue:

The kingdom of God Jesus calls us to isn't just about having our sins forgiven and getting to heaven. It is about the love and compassion of God for us, and this love being expressed in our lives, in the church community, and in society as a whole. It is about calling the oppressed to loving their enemies and forgive their oppressors, while challenging the injustices, discrimination and bigotry that oppress and marginalise. Jesus went on in the Sermon on the Mount to call his followers to be salt and light to the whole world. Reading from Isaiah 61 and announcing its fulfilment was just as radical. We understand it spiritually, but it was social too. For 1st century Jews, this prophecy was a declaration of the year of Jubilee (Lev 25:8-55), with all its social demands of property redistribution, the cancellation of debts, freeing prisoners and slaves.

For many Presbyterian and Methodist churches with an older, but reasonably comfortably-off congregations, one missional avenue open to them is a political one. Using your contacts and influence in the community to get homeless people better support and better resources, writing submissions to parliament about social welfare issues, supporting workers in those sectors, lobbying City Councils for a compassionate approach to the homeless and the poor and the mentally ill. Supporting food banks as you do is a valuable contribution to the ambulance at the bottom of the cliff, but there are things a middle-class church can do to strengthen fences at the top of the cliff without exhausting the already tiring aging bodies of the members. At a time of crisis, such as the church decline we are experiencing worldwide in the western world, it is important to know *why* you exist as a church here in this place. It's not as important *what* you are doing, or *how* you are doing it, but *Why*. There's an



excellent TED talk on this topic which teases this idea out.

https://www.ted.com/talks/simon_sinek_how_great_leaders_inspire_action

Start with the *why*. Tell people what you believe about *why* you are here, your *purpose* in being here. So if you wanted to follow this route, you would ask yourselves why is this St Paul's congregation here? Not *what* you do – church on Sundays - or *how* you do it - by faithful people working rosters... by *why* are you doing all that?

In his time, the prophet Micah told the people that conducting their inhouse religious ceremonies was not *what* God required of them, or *how* God wanted them to act, instead their purpose was something much simpler, and yet also much harder. "You have been told, O human beings, what is good, and what the Holy One really wants from you to carry out justice, love mercy, and to walk humbly before your God."

'Carry out justice

Love Mercy

Walk humbly before your God.'

A simple three-point plan telling *why* you might be here. Some would describe it as a weak political policy. It is however, your '*why*' for being here, gifted you by God's prophet.

What you do and *how* you will put that into practice is secondary.

Do you have the humility and the courage

to put such a weak-seeming little plan into practise

and to trust that God will use your weakness to confound the powerful?