

Come and Meet God

Faith-sharing in the community

O Lord my God, how great you are! (Psalm 104:1).

Mary, when she had found out that she was going to be the mother of the Messiah Jesus, sang a song:

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord (Luke 1:46)

—‘O Lord my God, how great you are!’ We do a bit of proclaiming the greatness of the Lord when we come together here. We say (or sing):

Lord God, heavenly King,
almighty God and Father,
we worship you, we give you thanks,
we praise you for your glory.

Anyone coming in here and hearing us say (or sing) that might come away with the impression that we think God is pretty good! ‘My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord’—‘O Lord my God, how great you are!’

I wonder if people would receive the same impression when they have contact with us outside of here. Would they think, ‘There is a person whose soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, in who they are—in what they do and in what they say’?

When I first arrived here in August, I met together with our ministry leaders—the Licensed Lay Ministers and the non-stipendiary clergy—to listen to them and hear how they came to be in ministry, and how they came to faith in God, and how that was important to them; where they think we are at as a parish, possible ways forward, and where best I could focus my energies during my time here. The personal stories were all different, and all most encouraging—what God had been doing in their lives and in the life of this parish. No doubt each of us could tell

stories like that, of things God has done in our lives, and how we know God is real. There is a lot that is substantial here in the life of this parish. There's a lot that we know, by experience, of the goodness of God, and the greatness of God. And that gives us something important and meaningful to share with others outside.

Burt we don't find that easy. One of the things that was asked for at that meeting of ministry leaders was help and guidance in articulating our faith and engaging with the wider community. And I said, maybe I could help with that, while I'm here. So that's what I want to talk with you about this morning.

In our 'Prayer for the Parish of Port Lincoln', that is printed each week in the Link leaflet, we ask God our Father to 'help us to be... a community which enjoys the celebration of the sacraments'—well, that's what we're doing here now, so that part of the prayer has been answered—praise God! We also ask God to help us to be a community that 'has a passion to proclaim the Gospel of Christ'—to be able to say in the hearing of others, 'O Lord my God, how great you are!' 'My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord'. And to know why we are saying that.

In my first sermon here I noted that in our parish website and facebook page, and in our published leaflets and history of the parish, Jesus doesn't get much of a mention. And I said, 'Maybe that's something we could work on together during the time I am here.' So here goes.

In your Link leaflets you'll find a copy of this booklet, 'Come and Meet God with the Port Lincoln Anglicans'—take it out, and we'll have a look at it together. The various leaflets available by the door give lots of helpful information about service times, contact details, church groups and activities, what you can join, and so on. I'm not sure they really say *why* we are here, and what we're on about, why people might want to do some of those things. Those publications are all mainly for people who show up at church, who are already a little bit interested. And this

booklet can be here for them as well. But this booklet is designed not just for those who show up at church, but for people who may never have set foot in the place, and it tries to let them know as simply as possible who we are and what we're here for—what we're on about, what we believe, what we do—as a church. We pray in that parish prayer for God's help 'to be a Church that is a... meaningful community'. We've already said we've got something substantial here, something that God's doing with us—that's what we want to try to get across.

There are heaps of evangelistic materials that you can get, from America, or from Sydney or wherever, but I wanted something that relates to who we are, where we are, here, in Port Lincoln—our Christian faith as we practise it here. Something local. So this uses local images, from our own churches and locality. And it starts by being upfront that as a church we are on about God. 'Come and meet God with the Port Lincoln Anglicans'. That's who we are—a group of people who come together to meet God—that's what we're here for. And we don't have to be embarrassed or apologetic about that. Paul the apostle says in Romans 10 that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. But, he says, they won't call on God if they don't believe in Him. And how will they believe in God if they've never heard about Him? And how will they hear about Him, if nobody tells them? (see Rom. 10:13–14). So it's got to start with us talking with people about the things of God. I don't see how else it can happen. And isn't that what we're here for? Someone I have loved and respected once said: 'the primary purpose of the church is to preach the gospel throughout the world and to bring its saving power to persons outside the message of salvation and the community of Christ'.¹ As William Temple, a former Archbishop of Canterbury said, 'The Church is the only society that exists for the benefit of those who are not its members'.²

¹ Geoffrey Bingham, *Eager to Preach*, NCPI, 1999.

² <https://www.christianquotes.info/quotes-by-author/william-temple-quotes/#axzz5Tb0rdlC1>

The apostle Peter says, 'Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you'. What is it that makes us hesitate to do that? Are we afraid of 'ramming it down people's throats'? Or coming across like a 'fire and brimstone' sermon? I've been a Christian for over seventy years, and I've never known anyone trying to ram it down my throat, and I'm yet to hear a fire and brimstone sermon. So it's time we got over that. That's not how it happens. That's why Peter goes on to say, 'do it with gentleness and respect' (1 Peter 3:15–16)—we can speak of the things of God 'with gentleness and respect'—we don't have to apologise for doing that. So we can say to people, 'Come and meet God with the Port Lincoln Anglicans!'

We've got a picture there from our stained glass windows at St Thomas's, of Thomas saying to the risen Jesus, 'My Lord and my God!' As Christians we meet God in our Lord Jesus Christ.

But, as we said, what if people don't believe in God, or don't know anything about who God is? They might say, 'Well, who *is* God?' It's a fair enough question—pretty basic. And one we need to know how to answer. But we don't need to answer it necessarily straight out. Sometimes it's good to answer a question with another question. Jesus often did that. It can help people to start thinking along new lines. Like 'How did everything come to be? Ever thought about that?' It can be part of the conversation: 'Look around us! How did all this come to be? What's it here for?' Here at Port Lincoln we are on land surrounded by sea. This is a photo I took down at Sleaford Bay. I remember the first time I ever came to Port Lincoln, on a family holiday. We went down to the Whalers Way, and the waves were crashing mightily against the rocks, and it made me think of some words from Job: 'These are indeed but the outskirts of his ways; and how small a whisper do we hear of him! But the thunder of his power who can understand?' (Job 26:14). 'O Lord my God, how great you are!' The sea and everything in it is very important to us here. Paul in Acts 14 was telling people about 'the living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them' (Acts 14:15). So we can tell people what we believe—from

our creed: 'We believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth'. Maker of us! We are amazing creatures, 'fearfully and wonderfully made' (Psalm 139:14). Whoever made us must be at least as amazing as we are, if not more so!

But—there are many versions of God or gods—how do we know what God is like? Another good question. And for Christians our answer is always: God is like Jesus. Our Adelaide Archbishop Geoff Smith, every time he preaches, he's always talking about Jesus, and what it means for us to be disciples of Jesus. It's absolutely central. This again is from our stained glass window. Paul said of Jesus, 'He is the image of the invisible God' (Col. 1:15). And here he is, from God, in our flesh, one of us, one with us. Showing us the wounds in his hand and side, by which he was put to death. Prepared to suffer with us and for us in the worst possible way. We can say, 'That's what God is like'. Jesus takes after his Father. We know that person, Jesus, to be the Christ, God's Messiah king, the divine Son of God, Lord over everything.

So—if God has made us, and God is like Jesus, and Jesus is our Lord, how then do we live? More particularly, how can we live in God's way? This picture is on the Guild banner in St Thomas's—the fire of the Holy Spirit. John the Baptist said of Jesus, 'He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire' (Matt. 3:11). On the Day of Pentecost 'tongues, as of fire', rested on the heads of all the believers, and they were all 'filled with the Holy Spirit' to be able to do what the Spirit gave them to do (see Acts 2:3–4). So 'we believe in the Holy Spirit'—how could we live without him? Paul says, 'God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us' (Rom. 5:5)—so we can live in God's way, with God's love.

There we are: we've already introduced someone to the triune God, into whose name we have been baptised. 'This is our faith. We believe in one God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit'. One and Three, together. That picture is one of our kneelers in St Thomas's.

It's important to give people some way of responding to this, and the obvious response is to pray. So we give them something to pray. You can't do better than the Lord's prayer, the prayer that Jesus himself taught us. It may ring bells for some people. This is the form we use as our Family prayer, 'Our Father in heaven', and here we are as the Family. Going right back to the apostles and beyond—John, Peter and Paul are all in our windows—then there's our amazing founding priest Matthew Hale, and all the people who have passed through here, right down to the present, old and young together, and beyond, into the time to come.

The centre fold: the church's shortcomings have had a lot of publicity lately—the church's dirty washing out on the line for all to see—so we need to be upfront about that as well: 'We are not perfect—yet'. We are not perfect, and we never claim to be. Paul the apostle says, 'Not that I... have already been made perfect; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own' (Philippians 3:12). We are not perfect, but we are heading for something that is.

I think even non-Christians would acknowledge, as it says in the book Ecclesiastes, 'There isn't anyone on earth who does only what is right and never sins' (Eccles. 7:50). That is incontestable. And we freely admit that, at the beginning of every service: we 'confess our sins in penitence and faith'. And we say that we do that 'confident in God's forgiveness'. How can we be confident in God's forgiveness—how can there ever be the forgiveness of sins?

Here we come to the heart of our faith, and this is the central image in the whole of the booklet. Paul the apostle says this is the gospel, this is the good news of God (see 1 Cor. 15:1–11). 'Jesus was handed over to die for our sins. He was raised to life to make us right with God' (Romans 4:25). This is what makes the difference. Paul said: 'if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord'—that on the cross he conquered sin and death—'and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved' (Rom. 10:9). When Thomas said

'My Lord and My God', he was speaking to Jesus raised from death—amazing!

That is what we are established in from the beginning of our Christian life: after Paul was converted he was told: 'be baptized, and have your sins washed away, calling on his name' (Acts 22:16). 'We believe in one baptism for the forgiveness of sins'. That covers us for the whole of our lives. And we can draw on it every day.

And that is what prepares us and gets us to work towards the promised new heavens and new earth where righteousness dwells (see 2 Peter 3:15)—Ken Holden took this picture of a sunrise over Boston Bay. The new heavens and new earth where righteousness dwells is this wonderful, but defiled, creation totally renewed and purified, and us with it—as Jesus was raised from death, so will we be, to that total newness of life: 'We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come'.

So, for those who don't know, what does the inside of a church look like? What do we Christians do when we come together? It may be a bit strange for people who aren't used to it. But we can let them know what happens, and why.

- We come to hear God speaking with us—through words from the Bible, in the preaching, and in the liturgy.
- We respond to God with thanks and praise—often through music.
- We pray for God's world and for God's people.
- We give to God's work—in money and in kind.
- We feed on Jesus—he is our strength for living, he is the one who keeps us going.

And from all that: we go in peace to love and serve the Lord. In Port Lincoln and the surrounding districts. And there are some of the ways we do that, in church and in the community, and details of those and other things are in the other leaflets that are available. On the back of the booklet (not on the front) are three of the places where we meet, at

Port Lincoln, Poonindie and Wangary, but we do meet in other places as well: in houses, in halls and nursing homes, in a woolshed, and even out of doors in a bushland setting.

Then there are contact details, and something about our place in the wider Anglican Church.

So you tell me: is this us? Is this who we are, and what we're on about? Is this what we believe and stand for, and is this what we do? And are we going to just keep this for ourselves, or is it worth sharing with others? And is this one way we can do that?

Mind you, this booklet on its own probably won't do the trick. This is not a stand-alone thing. This is designed as an aid to conversation. All of us have got something we can say. Paul the apostle said when he was on trial, 'To this day I have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying' (Acts 26:22). Isn't that something we can all say? Haven't we had that help that comes from God? Isn't that why we are here? And having received that help from God, don't we want others to find the same help? To be able to say to them as the apostle Peter does, 'Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you' as well? (1 Peter 5:7).

One simple way to start a conversation can be by asking a question. Many of us may know Barry Lock, with his wife Ann, from Kimba—they were CMS missionaries at Murree Christian School in Pakistan; now retired they live near us in the Adelaide Hills. Barry can't stop sharing his faith with all and sundry, and in recent years he heard this question from an evangelist trainer, and he uses it all the time—at bus stops, on public transport, wherever there are people. Barry suffers from macula degeneration and carries a white cane, so he finds it easy to ask people for a hand and engage them in conversation, and then he pops in this question: 'What has been your experience of Christianity and church and that stuff?' The advantage of that question is that people themselves can then talk and say what they want to say, and we can listen. Most people in Australia have had some contact with

Christianity, good or bad, and we can then respond and say what it means to us. One person told Barry about how they had been misused and hurt by the church, and Barry responded by saying, 'I want to apologise to you on behalf of the church for what happened to you, because that is not the way of Jesus'—and then he could say something about what Jesus is really like.

So I want to encourage and help us to have those kinds of conversations, and this booklet may be a help. Even so, only God can bring a person to faith in God. But that's something God really loves to do, and He wants us to be a part of that with him, so we can share in his joy.

Where do we start? The Strawberry Fair is less than two weeks time. It's not only our major fundraiser; it's also our major contact with the community and with the fringe Anglicans. I put a proposal to Parish Council, and they thought it was a good idea: we could have a stall called 'Good News from God—*Free!*' where we could talk with people and give these out. 'What has been your experience of Christianity and church and that stuff? Here's what our church is on about'. And we could show them into the church building where they could look around and light a candle and say a prayer. This particular stall won't be a money-raising stall; it will be a people-raising stall! Because Jesus said to his disciples, 'I will get you to catch people'—into the great big net of God's love.

There are other ways we can share it. There is a PowerPoint version that we can show people by plugging it into their own television screens, or showing them on a tablet—I've got it here on my phone! Well, we show other people pictures of our grandchildren on our phones—why not this?

However we do it, let's ask God to take and use us, as we honour him and his greatness in this way. Let's do it now, in the words of the parish prayer:

Pentecost 22 [29B]
St Thomas' Church Port Lincoln

21 October 2018
Martin Bleby

Father help us to be a Church that is a welcoming, caring, and meaningful community. A community which enjoys the celebration of the sacraments and has a passion to proclaim the Gospel of Christ. A community which reaches out to others, sharing the love of God with them. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.