

God must come first! Not even the most sacred obligations as understood by our culture or religion, can be allowed to wedge themselves between a Christian and their Lord. Everything else is subject to the power of death. Choose life! Choose real life!

A career woman, while negotiating a terminal disease with all of her robust Christian faith, had much time for reflection. Once when I was with her, she remarked sadly on the priorities of her family of origin.

Her family still lived on a farm close to provincial Ballarat. They were powerful figures in their local church. However, their sacred priorities as she had observed them were:

1) Family. 2) The local sport teams. 3) Church.

With utmost kindness and hearts that were breaking, they wanted her to go home and be nursed by them until she died. Although she loved them dearly, she would not spend her last weeks in that environment where, as she saw it, God came a poor third. They were offended and angry. But she was at peace with herself and her Lord in a Christian hospice where she was effectively ministered to each day.

I think she was saying: ***“Let the dead bury their dead. Even in my dying, I must continue to proclaim the kingdom of God.”***

May we be so courageous in our witness to the gospel, wherever our journey takes us.

Amen!! Thanks be to God!!

*This sermon was preached by Rev Mark J Dunn at
St John's Uniting Church
Cnr Mt Alexander Road and Buckley Street Essendon Victoria 3040
Home/Work Ph: 9375 1065 Mob: 0409 009 443
Email: mark@dunn.id.au
E-help: Rev Bruce D Prewer*

*www.stjohnsessenon.org.au
Enquiries about the Christian faith are always welcome.*



A Message from Mark!

Let the Dead Bury the Dead

27 June 2010 – Pentecost 5

Scripture: Luke 9:51-62

Words have incredible meaning. They're the only things I know that change radically if you aren't paying attention. Listen to these snippets from church bulletins showing us how words can change their meaning with their context.

- ***The ladies of the church have cast off clothes of every kind. They may be seen in the church basement on Friday afternoon.***
- ***As the maintenance of the churchyard is becoming increasingly costly, it would be appreciated if those who are willing would clip the grass around their own graves.***
- ***Weight watchers will be meeting in fellowship hall on Tuesday evening. Be sure to use the wide doors on the south side of the building.***
- ***This Sunday's sermon will be “What is hell like?” Come early and hear our choir practice. (Now that is not one of mine!)***

Sometimes even a single word can change the tone of a conversation. In today's Gospel lesson Luke tells us of a time when Jesus speaks seemingly harsh words to his followers. ***“Let the dead bury the dead. As for you, go and speak out for the kingdom of God.”***

This is one of the most upsetting statements ever made by a religious leader. It cuts at one of the things our culture holds most dear: ***family love, family loyalty, family respect.***

Jesus was asking for trouble when he came out with this comment. It was bound to make people either shocked or angry; maybe both.

The Bible has a discomfoting tendency to upset us. Whenever we're keen to settle down and live comfortably with things just as they are (be it culture or fashion, custom or habit, political normality, religious institution or church building, creed or personal code of morality) then watch out! The Bible will invade our comfort zone.

In fact, to make your peace with anything this corrupt world offers, is to trust that which is already polluted with death. Yes, that's what I said: **polluted with death!**

The Bible has a radical way of speaking of death. Death is not merely the absence of life. Death is an active, invading power. It is inextricably bound up with the evil forces of darkness.

Death contaminates and ruins all life. No human being can escape its hungry power. Death infests all our human knowledge, all our social structures and institutions. It gets its infected claws into our politics, philosophies, creeds, education and religious organisations. Nothing escapes death; everything is in danger of its corruption.

Therefore if we put our faith in such things, we are doomed. If we put our trust in political parties, democracy, a church denomination, Rotary, Lions, economic theories, social reform programs, even our family, then we are trusting something that is already invaded by death.

None of these things can last; they cannot transcend death. Trust them and we will be buried with them.

Only God is unaffected by death. God's kingdom; that new world about which Jesus spoke in memorable parables, that is where the only death-proofed life is found.

Trust God and live! What is more, anything we do out of love for God shall never be lost.

There may be plenty of goodness in our church, or within your family and friends, or in some wonderful humanitarian agency which you support, but unless it is aligned with the Life that is God, then it is subject to corruption and death.

The people of Israel were constantly challenged to choose God and life, or face corruption and death. The Biblical choice over and over again is between God and idols, holiness or corruption, getting lost or being found, life or death.

In our Old Testament reading from 2 Kings, we see in a stirring episode the older prophet, Elijah, bestowing his mantle upon his understudy, the younger prophet, Elisha. This was to enable God's prophetic, challenging, life-giving word to have continuity in directing the people of Israel.

And as Jesus puts it in John's Gospel: "*Whoever believes in me has already passed from death to life.*"

It is against this background that we can appreciate the offensive word in our Gospel reading for this Sunday: "*Let the dead bury the dead. As for you, go and speak out for the kingdom of God.*"

It arose when a man said he wanted to follow Jesus, but first he must "*bury his father.*" To the Jew this duty was extremely important. In Jewish custom, there was only one exemption from the duty of handling the body of a loved one and seeing it buried with respect. That exemption was for the High Priest who, because of his unique Temple duties, could not risk his ceremonial holiness being made unclean by touching a corpse.

Yet here is Jesus saying to a would-be disciple: "*No. Put God's kingdom first. Let the dead bury the dead.*" Your first loyalty is to life, not to death. Unless you make that choice clear cut, you are caught in the coils of death. "*Let the dead bury the dead. As for you, go and speak out for the kingdom of God.*"