

Tuesday 5 February, 2019

*A sermon preached by the Dean of Melbourne at Chapter Evensong
The Feast of the Martyrs of Nagasaki:*

‘Together transforming our city and diocese’, the tagline on our Cathedral publications boldly proclaims. God’s work of transformation stands at the heart of our Cathedral’s ministry, and is directly based on the vision our community holds to be a place where people may encounter the transformational love in Jesus Christ. Meeting the Lord Jesus Christ will profoundly change lives, our Cathedral vision asserts. And the stories of transformation that I have been privileged to witness here in the past seven years as Dean are testimony of the love that changes lives.

Next Saturday will see the ordination of a young man whose life was profoundly changed by his encounter with Christ in this place to be a deacon. We are proud that at most ordinations there is a candidate (or three) who first came into contact with church, and began asking questions about what it means to practise following Jesus Christ, here at St Paul’s. Jeremiah was a Pakistani student studying for a degree in Business Studies here in Melbourne. He visited the Cathedral as a tourist in 2013.

An orthodox Muslim with strict beliefs, Jeremiah was struck by the fact that at the hourly prayers at St Paul’s our duty Chaplain prayed for an end to the civil war in Syria, and the people there. Jeremiah approached the Chaplain, and asked: ‘why are you praying for Muslims?’ And was told that as Christians we are commanded to love our neighbours as we love God and ourselves. Our Chaplain proceeded to tell Jeremiah about Jesus, and invited him to join our English as a Second Language program. There, he shared in the welcome and fellowship of our community, and stayed for our worship in easy English.

The conversations about Jesus and faith continued over the meals our students share each Monday. And Jeremiah gained the profound insight that he should become a follower of Jesus himself. He was prepared for baptism and confirmation here in 2013, and joined our team of servers and worship leaders a year later. He began studying theology, and completed a ministry placement with us in 2016, and completed his studies last year. And tomorrow, Jeremiah and the other 22 candidates for ordination will meet here before entering a period of retreat to reflect on the commitment they will make to follow Christ as ministers of his good news. Together, we transform our city and diocese, when we become welcoming witnesses to the life changing love of Christ.

Our Patron, Saint Paul, speaks about the ingredients for the work of transformation. He writes to the church in Philippi, a congregation he founded and evidently loved

deeply. Paul is under house arrest in Rome, and soon will face martyrdom. And so he shares with the Philippians his insights into how the spread of the gospel has been made possible, even as a prisoner in his own home, when others united to speak about the transforming love of Christ. Paul's imprisonment has emboldened the Christian community: 'having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, the sisters and brothers dare to speak the word with greater boldness'.

Because of Paul's unwavering testimony to his prison warders, members of the elite Imperial Guard have experienced what, a couple of millennia later, we still experience in this place. That the lives of those who have come into contact with the living, loving Lord Jesus Christ, will be changed when we bear witness to, and live out the faith we hold. And even though the divisions of the church in Rome were still as deep as they had been when Paul first wrote to them, in his epistle to the Romans, a decade or so earlier, Paul knows that, as long as 'Christ is proclaimed in every way', God's message of transformation is effectual. 'And in that I rejoice'. We, too, do well in recalling that, in spite of the divisions faced by our own churches, this truth holds fast today: wherever 'Christ is proclaimed in every way', there lives, institutions and communities are changed.

Starting with our own communities here at St Paul's. Over the past seven years we have been privileged to see many signs of transformation among us. Many new members, from more than 25 nations, have come to experience our welcome and care, and have come to share with us in the joy that following Jesus as disciples can bring. New initiatives, such as the establishment of our Girls' Choir in 2015, have enriched our praise and worship. New facilities, such as the our Cathedral Education and Learning Centre, offices and meeting rooms, have enabled us to share in teaching and fellowship: today, while one congregation shares in morning tea in one meeting room, another is able to study the Scriptures or share in theological reflection in another. New sustainability initiatives have reduced our carbon emissions by a third, as a first step in making sure that we are serious about our God-given mandate to be good stewards of God's creation. And that is just the work of transformation experienced by our members.

But the signs of transformation are not only for the communities that visit and worship here on weekdays and Sundays. Our new governance instrument, the *Cathedral Act 2016*, enshrined in law our vision to be a home for *all* Anglicans in our diocese: regardless of whether they live in the suburbs or the country, the inner city or at the beach; regardless of whether their worship is traditional or contemporary; whether their parishes are flourishing or experiencing challenges. There is a home for all here at St Paul's: a home away from their Sunday or weekday worshipping home; a home of homes, if you like. A place where prayer is offered daily for our Archbishop, and each of the parishes and ministries of our diocese. A place for whom

our parishes pray every day. A place where God's transformational love can be made visible when we join together in faith.

Take last year's *Thy Kingdom Come* initiative. During the ten days between Ascension and Pentecost members of our congregations and the wider diocese were invited to pray intentionally for five friends or family to come to know and love Jesus Christ. A parishioner from the inner city told me that she was praying for her grandchildren to share her love of Christ, a parishioner in a rural parish told me that he prayed for his work mates to know Jesus. One of our members told me that the invitation to pray each day intentionally made her share her love for Jesus with her hairdresser: not something she found easy, she told me, but she had become emboldened to speak out of the depth of her prayerful faith to share with the person who had cut her hair for many years why she went to Church.

'The brothers and sisters', Paul tells us, 'dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear', if they are made confident to do so. In Paul's Rome this confidence came from his own example as a witness to Jesus among those who had imprisoned him. In our own Melbourne it comes when we testify to the life-changing acts of transformation we witness when we open our eyes to the work of God's love among us.

Sometimes, as in the case of our congregant Jeremiah, who entered the Cathedral a Muslim visitor and will leave it next Saturday an Anglican minister, the results of our emboldened, lived-out witness are very visible indeed. Often, however, we may not see the result of our endeavours, our witness, for a long time. Last Sunday, I shook hands with a couple from Switzerland: 'thank you for making us so welcome here', they told me, 'we now go back to Switzerland'. And told me that, two years ago, they first came here, and found us to be a community that strengthened their faith so much that, on return home, they continued to go to church. They had come back to Australia to be with us again for three weeks, to recharge their batteries, as it were. And to tell me how transformational that first encounter with lived faith had been for them in their own lives. Sometimes we have to wait to see the results of our witness.

Today marks the anniversary of the martyrdom of 26 witnesses to the transforming love of Jesus Christ at Nagasaki in 1597. The efforts of the missions of Francis Xavier and Paul Mikli had led to thousands of Japanese people coming to faith. At the end of the sixteenth century, the imperial regent put to death their leadership, ordering for 9 priests and 14 religious to be killed in the same their Lord had been. Chained to their crosses, they were spared the slow death by asphyxiation that Jesus died, and speared to death instead. The regime hoped that this act of brutality would end the story of the Christian faith in Japan. Indeed, until the end of the nineteenth century, they forced all Nagasaki residents to step on bronze plaques depicting Jesus and his

mother to prove that they were not Christians. Yet despite the brutality of the death of their leaders, and the shame of having to shake the dust off their feet on the image of Christ, some 30,000 Christians remained faithful, and continued to practise their faith in hiding. The *Kakure Kirishitan*, hidden Christian communities, led by laypeople, formed the seed of the modern church in Japan.

‘It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way’, Paul wrote to the Church in Philippi, ‘but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now and always in my body, whether by life or death’. God’s work of transformation will continue, where Christ is made known passionately and compassionately, where his ambassadors are equipped by visionary leaders to share that faith with others, where we forgo our divisions and differences in order and ‘dare to speak the word of life with greater boldness and without fear’. God’s work of transformation will flourish where we underpin it in personal prayer, praying for one another daily, ‘for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will result in my deliverance’, Paul knows.

God’s work of transformation will be enabled where we keep alive the love for Christ we experienced when we first came to faith, that sense of belonging and call that is God’s gift to us. It is shaped by our conversations, our witness: where we share words of life and words that *give* life. And it is maintained by our faithfulness: as people who are willing themselves to become the seeds of the transforming love of Christ in the places to which God sends them whether that be as witnesses in our living, or as with the examples of St Paul and the Martyrs of Nagasaki, through our dying.

And so, as we give thanks for the privilege of being able to share God’s transformational love with others, we pray that the Lord of life would continually resource and equip us with all needful gifts of grace for our shared work: ‘together transforming our city and church’. May he grant us strength in our beliefs and intent: confidence in faith, boldness in our confession, and assurance in our vision. May he grant us the gifts of service and community: joy in our discipleship, discernment to respond to his call, and diligence in prayer for one another.

And may he grant us the gifts of unity and love so that we may proclaim Christ ‘from goodwill and out of love’. Knowing that we, like our patron, are put here in this place ‘for the defence of the good news’ of the Love that gave himself on a cross so that we might have life and share that Love. Our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom, with the Father and the Spirit, be praise and glory, power and dominion, now and forever. Amen.