

Isaiah 66.10-14; Ps.66.1-8; Galatians 6.7-16; Luke 10.1-11,16-20

Let's try a little role-play today.

Imagine you are in the marketing business, and there are surely some of our congregation who are, and someone were to ask you to prepare a campaign to attract people to join us, to become a part of the work of God, where would you start? And then imagine I gave you today's gospel as your brief, what could you do with it?

Jesus' exhortations are often unpalatable. The job offer he has in mind is bare bones with incentives very different from those before us in today's corporate world. No wonder the labourers are few. We aren't being killed in the rush by volunteers.

It doesn't surprise us, therefore, to see church numbers dwindle and people opt for no religion or, at least, vague belief but at a distance and without a serious commitment.

In the most recent census in Australia, the results of which appeared this week, the percentage of those who identify as Christian has, for the first time, fallen below 50% from 52 five years ago to 44 last year.

These are not surprising figures and are reflected in many parts of the world, especially in what we called western cultures where prevailing values are at odds with what the church proclaims.

But what does the church proclaim? Not surprisingly, we look at scripture to answer that question, but this is problematic. And the problem resides in how we read the Bible. We all know what the Bible says. We just don't agree on what it means.

There are those within the broad church who solve the problem by sweeping the difficult, tricky bits of scripture (and there are plenty of them) under the table and focussing on the bright and breezy, positive passages that confirm our own prejudices of a life we prefer to lead. But as I suggested a couple of weeks ago, we cannot simply excise the unpalatable from what we read. We need to meet them head-on and make sense of them in the world we encounter now. It isn't easy to take texts and recorded teachings from 2000 years ago and lay them over our present experience and assume a perfect fit.

The world isn't a place where all is bright and breezy, sweetness and light. We know that and you don't need me to stand here and

rehearse the challenges we have before us. We would have to cancel lunch and most of the afternoon.

Our lectionary doesn't give us that luxury. We take it as it comes and must make sense of it.

Richard Hooker, to whom I refer in this week's e-news invitation to church, emphasised the three foundations of thinking in the emerging church in post-Reformation England. Those are scripture, tradition and reason, importantly working together. That doesn't happen if we imagine scripture to stand opposed to reason (and I interpret this to mean broad, intelligent thinking about our faith) and to the traditions we inherit as the church has evolved over two thousand years.

So let us turn to our readings. Isaiah and the psalm promise much that is good and positive, celebrating a God who enables prosperity, who will not let our feet slip. And these are the backdrop to the challenges we hear in Galatians and Luke – sobering reminders that we reap what we sow and that we who would share God's good news go like lambs into the midst of wolves. It will not be easy, and we were never promised that.

Because the truth of what we are hearing reminds us that our real work is not about us. It is about that sense of other that is at the heart of our faith.

If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit. Loosely paraphrased - if we invest in those things that carry earthly/human imperatives, that's what we will get in return; if we invest in those matters that are of concern to the Spirit of God, the life of God's people will be the beneficiary.

And I would contend that this is at the heart of what Jesus is saying. Go out and be Christ to the world. It will be demanding, but you don't need a lot of baggage. Offer what God has to give. If they turn away, shake the dust off your feet, brush off their residue and press on.

And know that there is much joy to be found in that, because we are working to make the world a better place. To those who think in the right way, that is good news, it is appealing. Yes, it is counter-

cultural; those who don't get it won't get it. Those who have ears to hear, let them hear.

But it is a more excellent way. And it is a path that brings joy. The sad perception is that the faith we share is buried under an immovable pile of unpalatable nay-saying. But at its best, it is life-giving.

My parents were raised among the coal tips of north-eastern England, Billy Elliot country. Everything was grey and so, it must be said, was the kind of primitive Methodism in which they grew and brought to us as children. Sincere and faithful, but not much joy. My grandfather went one Sunday morning to collect the local preacher from the train. He approached the most likely person getting off the train and said 'Are you the local preacher for the Methodist church?' The fellow replied 'Certainly not! I've just got indigestion!'

We don't want a religion that shouts gloom and doom.

I was reminded of an Australian politician who said that the job of government is to comb through the fairy floss of public life looking for the value. Put into a church language, I would say that the job God calls us to is to comb through the candy floss of human life and experience looking for the value.

Hard as it is at times, we want a faith that flourishes in human prospering. That is where the harvest is to be found.

So, let us pray to the Lord of the Harvest. Let us pray for fellow-workers to be sent out, for those who would welcome us and the peace that will be offered to them, for those that will not welcome the good news that its slow-moving grace would work in their lives, for ourselves that we may be sustained on the journey by the provisions God brings.

And in that work, the Lord be with you....