

## **Sermon preached by Fr John Stewart**

### **Pentecost 16C**

**8 September 2013**

**(The day after the Federal Election)**

#### **Readings:**

Jeremiah 18.1-11

Philemon 1-25

Luke 14.25-35

A couple of weeks ago Ann and I represented the Vicar at an event sponsored by the City of Stonington at the Town Hall. It was to award several local people with a Citizen of the Year Award. A man who had developed an art exhibition in Toorak Village, a young man promoting Auskick for children, a woman who has put a lot of energy into campaigning against inappropriate building development, a woman who founded a charity which collects food from shops and markets and distributes it to 350 charities where people are fed, a young indigenous woman running mentoring programs for other indigenous youth in the area, and a group of volunteers working at Very Special Kids with children with terminal illnesses. It was most inspiring to hear what these people are doing and it was great to see the wide community recognizing them. In his address, the Mayor said that these people are honoured because “what they are doing is making a difference to the people of the community”.

If I had to have a title for this morning’s reflection, it would be “making a difference”. It is a theme running through all the readings. In the first reading we hear from Jeremiah, a prophet of the 7<sup>th</sup> century before Christ. He lives in a time of huge religious and political upheaval – a time when people have turned their backs on God. Jeremiah is sent to remind them about God’s ways and to call them to give up their evil ways. The vivid image is of a potter working at the wheel. He starts off with a lump of clay and carefully works with it. If something goes wrong in the process he smashes it down to the lump of clay and starts again. This, Jeremiah says, is how God deals with us. Constantly working to transform and shape us until we become the people God calls us to be. Jeremiah is to make a difference in this work of God just as each person by their actions and choices is to make a difference.

In the second reading we have a very personal letter from Paul, and a very personal predicament. He writes to Philemon about his slave who has run away. The treatment of such a slave was death. Paul explains that the slave has converted to faith in Christ – he has changed from being useless to useful. He begs Philemon to act out of love, forgive the slave and recognize his new life. This is a practical example of what we had in the first reading. Someone turns their life to embrace God’s ways and makes a difference to many others. May Philemon’s choice also make a difference and take him back as a brother in Christ.

The background to the passage from the gospel is this: the disciples have been travelling around with Jesus for some time, listening to his teaching and observing the way he has responded to a

whole range of people. Jesus has constantly been spelling out the life God calls us to be living. God's dream for each person is full and abundant life, outsiders belong, differences are to be welcomed, paradoxes can be held together in creative tension, love is central. Then Jesus sends the disciples out to begin to share this vision with people they meet. They are to take every opportunity to talk about God, about priorities, about choices and values – and about acting in ways that will make a difference.

They have been out and come back to share their experiences. Here Jesus alerts them to what they already know – it is not easy, but demanding, and challenging, and puzzling. Sometimes it leads to rejection or indifference – as Jeremiah knows so well. And Jesus does himself.

Now he speaks to a large crowd who have come to him – some will be disciples, but others will be curious. To grasp this passage we need to consider some of the language. Jesus talks about choosing what is important and in the translation we use he says “hating father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters.” We bring a lot of baggage to the word “hate” and it's not helpful. The meaning here is more like, “be less attached to”. When a young person grows up in a family and then falls in love. The couple get married and leave their families to create a new family of their own. They separate themselves from their parents because they now have a more important relationship to explore. That's the sense that Jesus has here. The newly married couple don't hate their family of origin, but they are now separated from them because of new priorities. To be a friend of Jesus is also a new priority, a new relationship and, Jesus says, nothing else should make a higher claim on us.

He also talks about carrying the cross and following him. It is foolish for us to read this literally. We don't have to drag a cross through the streets and have someone nail us to it. Indeed, absolutely nothing would be gained if that was to be done. Here is how I make sense of this: Jesus gradually develops an understanding of what lies ahead for him. He gives himself to it willingly, knowing that God is at work in everything that happens. Jesus chooses the way he does fully believing that his actions will make a difference to God's work in the world. And he calls us to the same way. Make choices, take actions that will make a difference. Let your life count for something. Give yourself to the big picture of God's dream, plan kingdom becoming a reality on earth.

Jesus then uses two examples to spell out the cost of being a follower, before *enlisting*. You must be so dedicated to the cause that you are willing to forfeit all that you have. You might be enthusiastic at the beginning, but can you carry this through to completion? Just as salt can lose its savour, so can an initial commitment, however sincere, fade in the course of time. Don't allow your allegiance to Christ to deteriorate and so become ineffectual.

Act to make a difference for God's sake. God depends on us to give witness to the story we have in each of us. Each day we have small opportunities with neighbours and friends to share something of what is important to us.

Today's Collect is a prayer we might take with us for the days ahead:

Grant us the wisdom that your Spirit bestows  
So that with courage we may proclaim your prophetic word  
And complete the work you have set before us.