

Presbytery of North East Victoria - Chairperson's letter of encouragement

Hello friends,

I am not sure whether it is vanity or integrity, but when I write to you each month, I feel the thoughts and the words I share should be mine, something from the depth of me to the depth of you. But, it is never true that what we think and say originates from ourselves alone.

Recently, a friend pointed me to the Rev Jon Swales, who I found, in a few short sentences, summed up much of what I have been thinking for a long time. The sentence that first caught my eye was this: *I sometimes think the church has developed a theology for growth, but not much theology for faithful diminishment.* I suspect I have been trying to pay attention to faithful diminishment – growing smaller faithfully - for a long time. Jon went on to point to faithfulness as the measure of success for Christians and then to point to the holiness of what follows. More of this in a minute.

For a long time, I have thought about how we measure success. In the past five years, as I have participated in the life of the wider church (something I have not much done before) I have been, perhaps, naively bewildered at the focus I have found on the church - the Uniting Church, on who and what we are, on the things that differentiate us from the rest and on our survival. This seems to me to miss the mark, which, if you follow that derivation of words back far enough, is the definition of sin – to miss the mark. To be aimed in the right direction, but to miss the bull's eye.

In his blog Jon Swales went on, in these terms: *there can be a holiness in staying. A holiness in keeping prayer alive in a place the wider culture has stopped noticing. A holiness in loving people who cannot repay you with influence or statistics. A holiness in remaining present where things are fragile, tired, and quietly falling apart.... Not giving up, not cynicism. Just refusing to abandon people. Helping communities die well where they are dying. Bearing witness gently. Keeping the prayers going to the end. Sitting beside something fragile and beloved as it slips away, believing that resurrection still belongs to God even when you may not personally live to see it.*

I found this personally encouraging and so, in turn, my encouragement to you today is to see the holiness in the things you do: every time the story of God amongst us is told, in every prayer that is prayed, in every act of care, in every act of friendship that expects nothing in return. In this we are part of the broken body of Christ, through which, in which, God is reconciling the world. We should not be frightened or ashamed of smallness, or weakness or decline. In some sense all of this - smallness and weakness – can be a refining fire in which we may rediscover who we truly are, our true purpose.

So, my friends, my encouragement is to continue to gather around Jesus the founder and perfecter of our faith. Continue to tell the sacred story. Pray often, no matter how fragile your prayers seem. Break bread together not just in the holiness of communion in the sanctuary, but in all the ways that that bread - food in all its forms – can be shared. Practice loving kindness, ease loneliness and suffering where you can. Treat the living and the dead with dignity. Stand quietly, but firmly, against those who gather power to dominate. Treasure up holiness and the knowledge of holy things in what seems a deliberately forgetful world. In this the kingdom of God comes – not in the sense that we bring in this kingdom by our actions, but in the sense that the kingdom that God brings, is made visible.

As I think about all these things there settles in me a sense of peace and a calm that is surely the gift of God. This I wish for you, my friends in Christ.

Gereldine