



Growing

1 in a series of 4 sermons for Ordinary Time

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13th Sunday in Ordinary Time

2 July 2017

Jeremiah 28:5-9

Romans 6:12-23

Matthew 10: 40-42

God of life, may your Word grow in us and grow us. Amen.

Today I begin a four-part series to speak into the season we find ourselves in – Ordinary Time. I'd like to think that this season can be anything but ordinary – and actually I *know* that this season can be extraordinary, thanks be to God.

I'm also going to attempt to rise to the challenge that John Hughes issued me a few weeks ago – to share some of the discernment that I personally went through to say “yes” to this opportunity to serve here as Interim Priest in Charge.

First, a bit about this season of Ordinary Time – and today's theme of “growing”.

Ordinary Time spans two periods in our church year: the first is in the early part of the year after Epiphany until Lent; and the second starts after Pentecost and stretches through until the beginning of a new liturgical year at Advent. In Ordinary Time there are no big festivals. Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter and Pentecost are behind us. So we settle into a rhythm of “here we are” – in this place, in this world, facing the challenges of living the faith we share. As a prayer we will pray later in our liturgy says: “*Now we offer ourselves all that we have and are, to serve you faithfully in the world*”.

The liturgical colour of Ordinary Time is green, symbolising life in nature, representing growth, life and hope, and speaking of the grace that draws people into the life of God. Perhaps we can see it as a time when we pray, read and reflect on our scriptures to gain insight into the ordinary concerns and challenges we face in our everyday lives.

But we dishonour God if we expect nothing but ordinariness in Ordinary Time. Our God constantly creates and re-creates, our redeemer Jesus walks places with us where we struggle to go by ourselves, and the Holy Spirit enlightens us and offers us peace that passes our understanding. All these qualities describe a God in whom and with whom extraordinary things can happen.

In Paul's letter to Romans today we heard about sin and grace. Paul seeks to explain that letting sinfulness guide our actions is a kind of bondage, but opening up to God and following Jesus offers freedom. If we decide to put love of God at the centre of our lives – the centre around which all we say and think and do revolves – then we will notice, see and experience the freely giving nature of God.

In our Gospel Jesus speaks to his disciples about giving and receiving, before he commissions them to teach and preach. He tells them that the attitude and practice of both giving and receiving shares the love of God.

This is how the Message translation records the words of Jesus:

40-42 "We are intimately linked in this harvest work. Anyone who accepts what you do, accepts me, the One who sent you. Anyone who accepts what I do accepts my Father, who sent me. Accepting a messenger of God is as good as being God's messenger. Accepting someone's help is as good as giving someone help. This is a large work I've called you into, but don't be overwhelmed by it. It's best to start small. Give a cool cup of water to someone who is thirsty, for instance. The smallest act of giving or receiving makes you a true apprentice. You won't lose out on a thing." (Matthew 10:40-42)

As I have looked back over this time of discernment for me in the last few months I have often reflected on the video conversation between Ellie and Bishop Justin that we played here on the Sunday after the announcement of Ellie's election as Bishop. Ellie spoke of love and fear, observing that if we discern and operate from a place of love, then the language of fear does not have any space.

When Bishop Justin offered me the opportunity to step into the role of Interim Priest in Charge after Ellie's departure, I have to admit that fear and loss were my main concerns. I was fearful of losing the security of the role I already had, fearful of the responsibility, fearful that I wouldn't have time for my study, fearful of losing my way, fearful that I would fail.

So my initial response was to run away. Like the prophet Jonah I wanted to run in the other direction. I wanted you and this parish to let me go. My three year covenant was up for renewal in June anyway – a really good reason to say “Ok – that's it for me. I've done this, I've partnered with Ellie, and it's been great. It's time for me, like Ellie, to move on and leave you to your next season.”

I knew I was trying to run and hide. And I knew that God knew. If I thought I was succeeding at running and hiding, I wasn't really.

In the midst of my fear and confusion, a wise colleague suggested that I ask one or two people I trust as deep pray-ers to intentionally pray for me. But there was a twist: don't give them any details, don't tell them about the choice I am facing. Just ask them to call me to mind in their prayer time, to see what happens, then invite them to share their insights with me a couple of weeks later.

I knew that many of you were intentionally praying into our time of transition here at St Alban's, but I did as suggested. I contacted a friend living in another city, a Christian woman deeply committed to a daily pattern of meditation and intercession, and asked her to pray for me. I explained that I was having to make a decision very soon about ministry. I didn't give her any more details, but invited her to pray for me and to seek from God any insights or words or images. Her response was immediate and clear: “Yes” she said. “Thank you for asking. Prayer is one of my joys and this will be a different journey.... Look forward to talking to you later!”

In the meantime, I received a bolt from the blue. As you know, this was a cancer diagnosis – a recurrence of breast cancer. My world turned upside down and the plight of St Alban's Eastbourne was the least of my worries. This was big. This was my life. How could I possibly contemplate any of this parish stuff now?

My spirit of fear went into overdrive. And this was probably about the same time that your spirit of fear started to rise. I could perceive among you a sense of worry and unease, a desire for clarity: What's happening? Why is it taking so long to sort things out? When Ellie goes, who will lead us?

I couldn't answer your questions. I had enough of my own. I worried that taking on this role would be too much of a challenge, too much to ask. There were loads of reasons why I could have quite reasonably said no to Bishop Justin's invitation to be your Interim Priest in Charge: I was facing major surgery, I needed to reduce work commitments, not add to them. I needed to harness all my energy into caring for myself.

But shutting that door didn't sit well with me. I had a sense that I'd be using my health as a reason to keep running and hiding, driven by fear. I realised that God was calling me to trust God more deeply than I ever had before. God was nudging me to approach the whole thing from a different mindset: not from a perspective of fear, but from a place of trust and faithfulness.

In the meantime the person I had asked to pray for me was praying in the dark. Not only was she unaware of the ministry choice I was facing, she was also unaware of my cancer diagnosis.

When we talked by phone after a couple of weeks she explained that she didn't have any answers, but that she'd received two questions a few days apart when she had prayed for me. She had no idea what they meant, and no idea if they could make sense to me. She offered them to me, trusting in the sacred task of prayer, and trusting in God's faithfulness.

The first question she received from God was:

"Which road has the potential to widen?"

As I listened I knew what this insight pointed to. I might be afraid, but I also knew that taking up this role would grow me, teach me, and open me up to new possibilities. Yes there may be tough bits, but I knew in my heart of hearts that I couldn't run away. Stepping into this space would widen my perspective. I would grow into and through this opportunity for leadership.

Ok. What else?

My friend shared her second question.

“What place would you be in if your inside reality was also the outside reality?”
Whoa! She didn’t know that my inside reality was pretty much broken. That the greatest temptation I faced was to run and hide, say no, and go and lick my wounds. Yet this question was asking me to make my inside reality an outside reality – to face up, step up, be honest to myself, be vulnerable to others and to respond to God’s call.

By inviting my friend to pray, I had entrusted myself to her and to God. She had prayed and God had answered. I received insights that for me confirmed God’s calling of me into this role. It might be new and challenging, but I would learn and grow.

God was also nudging me to openly share my interior reality with you, to acknowledge it and trust you with it. I’d minister among you not from a spirit of fear, but from a place of trust and love. I’d sink deeply into God’s care and invite you to do the same. Last week as I received my licence as Interim Priest in Charge, in response to the question “Are you willing to accept this responsibility?” I said: “I am, trusting in God’s help, and partnering with members of this faith community.” We’re in this together...and you’re not allowed to run and hide!

So, back to our Ordinary Time theme of “growing”. Growing is about acknowledging, processing, and reflecting on the stuff that life throws at us. The rubbish stuff of life isn’t God’s will, or punishment from God. What *is* God’s will is that we hold the raw material of our lives and notice it, question it, examine it, pray into it, and ultimately choose to learn from it and grow through it – even because of it.

The beginning of Ordinary Time for me has been anything but ordinary. I would not choose to have a cancer diagnosis: for whatever reason or combination of reasons we don’t understand, it chose me. Without it I would probably still be standing here. I probably would have come to a point where I said: “Ok God I’ll stop running and say yes, I know you’re calling me into this.” But I wonder if, inside, I’d be approaching it differently. I suspect I’d be scared about trying to fill Ellie’s big shoes. I’d be scared of the high expectations you have for me. I’d be relying much more on my own strength.

Instead, I am approaching this role with a much healthier sense of vulnerability, openness and trust in God. To echo the words of Jesus, it's a large work I'm called into, but I won't be overwhelmed by it. I'm placing limits around my role. I have other commitments, and I need to look after my health. I want to give time to friends and family, and be a mum to my adult children – who despite being in their 20s keep coming back to live at home again!

So I offer myself to you, trying to hold the role with the responsibility and dignity it deserves, but also somewhat lightly.

There's been a lot of "extraordinary" and unexpected growing for me in this Ordinary Time. Knowing God, there'll probably be more to come.

My prayer for you today is that whatever ordinary or not so ordinary challenges you face in this season of Ordinary Time, you will not be preoccupied, driven or paralysed by fear. With God's help may you hold your challenges and concerns, look at them, reflect upon them, pray into them, and be open to the growing they hold within them.

Go with God. Grow in God.
Amen.

