

Mark 1: 40-45
Pymble 11.2.18
Being Inclusive

Let me start this morning with a bit of a preamble...

I believe 2018 will be an important one for our congregation: we have our Life and Witness Consultation happening soon, which will now be held concurrently with the 3 Village churches; and the matter of ministry is settled for a few more years with my extension being confirmed.

But I need to say rather than that meaning *more of the same*, a large part of the rationale for my extension was to provide the stability to tackle our future, especially with the Village congregations.

We are approaching the pointy end of needing to make some large decisions about the shape and direction of our mission as a congregation and as a Village.

And so I look to you all to provide your prayerful input and ideas when we come to those moments of consultation and decision-making.

Part of my pulpit role at such a time of discernment, I believe, is to preach in such a way that we might hear the word of God in the very situation we find ourselves as a church.

I guess that is always the case but sometimes the Scriptures lend themselves more to a personal or a general attitudinal application.

However, I will be deliberately seeking to preach in such a way that might raise questions and hopefully point to some answers for congregations like ours

that have to confront uncomfortable realities, negotiate change and explore new possibilities.

I haven't really looked forward at what readings lie ahead but this is the interpretive discipline

I am putting on myself for the coming months.

And what I would really love as a Minister is that when we come to those discussions

we will be grounding our reflections in what we have discerned from the Word of God; as much as our own thoughts and preferences.

The way I'd like to tackle this familiar gospel reading today is for us to imagine what may have occurred *after* these events.

The man who had approached Jesus was healed and cleansed of his leprosy but Jesus seemed to be at least equally concerned

with the man's inclusion back into the life of the community.
Jesus instructs him to go to the priest,
which is basically about getting the formal OK
to return to a normal communal life.
This was significant because as you may recall,
leprosy was socially a very isolating disease.
Following laws in Leviticus 13
those with these sorts of skin conditions
had to live apart from family and community,
you had to tear your clothes, leave your hair disheveled
and you really did have to warn anyone approaching,
by yelling "Unclean, unclean."
Not a great experience and not marvelous for your sense of well-being.

And as we think about the qualities of churches today,
my question is this:
I wonder what sort of reception this former leper received from his community
and particularly from his synagogue
when he turned up the following Sabbath?
Would he have been warmly welcomed,
or would there have been some reservation?
Would there have been a ready embrace –
people inviting him to sit next to them –
or would there have been some residual concern
over just how clean, how healed he really was?
I mean, he was widely known as the person in town to avoid;
parents would have warned their children about staying away from him
and here he is now sitting in the pew next to you.
How do you feel? How do you respond?
He's been given the all-clear by the priest,
but you can never be so sure; the experts have made mistakes before...
What might his experience be
of being included back into the faith community?

One of the first qualities of a faithful church in our age
is that it must be inclusive –
not because it sounds good on a mission statement;
not because it is politically correct,
but simply because it was Jesus' way.
Jesus deliberately included the excluded.
Jesus welcomed at table those who were on the margins of society
and were considered unclean, and therefore not welcome.
And of course, this was one of the main reasons
he got the religious leaders so off side –
he kept loving those horrible sinners!
Being inclusive is a bit more than being welcoming,

though it begins there.

Inclusivity is our willing and active efforts

to welcome, incorporate, and love those who are different from us.

A church these days will have little chance of growing or attracting others

if it does not have deep down, in its DNA,

a welcoming heart and an inclusive manner.

Somehow people know –

especially those who have never been part of church –

they know that churches ought to be welcoming and inclusive

because that's what we say about God.

And they are correct.

God is.

And we ought to be.

So here's a quick self assessment test,

because these things begin with each of individually

and then seep into our common life...

On a scale of 1-10, assess your comfort level

in interacting with the following sorts of people –

this is just for you; there'll be no sharing...

- How do you feel about talking with a person of the opposite sex?
- Completely diff generation? Say by 40 years?
- Different cultural background?
- Ethnic background with very poor English
- Someone with directly opposing political views?
- Someone with a physical disability? an intellectual disability?
- How about someone who clearly has a different sexual preference?
- If you are fairly well educated, how about someone who is uneducated? Unsophisticated?
- A person with an obvious mental illness?
- Someone with AIDS?
- Someone not long out of prison?
- Someone from a different religious background, or an evangelical atheist?
- How about someone who is struggling with their gender identity – they're not sure if they've been born in the correct body because it feels so wrong for them?

The more I list these differences,

most of which are pretty commonplace today,

the more I realise our Pymble congregation is quite mono-cultural.

We reflect the Pymble community of 30-40 years ago very well

but not so well the Pymble community of 2018,

which as you know is changing rapidly.

The fact that we do not have a great diversity does not mean we are not inclusive – there are many factors at play – but it does mean we should at least be looking at ourselves, asking ourselves the questions and being alert to ways that we might be increasingly relevant to our local community.

We certainly should not aim for the opposite by hunkering down to resist the changes; trying to become a little enclave against the growing diversity around us. There is no future for the church in that approach.

As the multiplying unit developments around us deliver 1000s of new people to within 500 metres of our door, many of whom will be different in some way, these are not theoretical matters.

We may not have welcomed their construction in the first place; but that is now besides the point – they now represent a new group of people for us to engage as a church; they have become our neighbours, whom we are invited – commanded – to love.

I wonder how we will do that?

One thing is for sure –

if we are serious, it won't simply be by staying the same waiting for them to come to us, and making them fit in with what we do.

That is the old model of attraction and it worked up to about the 1970s; but we are in a vastly different context these days.

Being inclusive is about how we actively welcome people, how the church might get onto other's territory; how we might serve their needs.

Let me finish with what I see as a very good news story when it comes to the wider idea of inclusion; just one example of a local congregation willing to accept some big changes in order to accommodate a different group.

And it is St Ives Uniting Church.

A medium-sized Korean group that is a faith community of the Uniting Church was looking for a new home.

St Ives was suggested and the conversations began.

But instead of simply exploring a property sharing arrangement, like so many churches on the north shore, the conversation moved towards full inclusion;

to become one quite different Uniting Church congregation.

Why be two separate UC congregations meeting on the same property

when the Anglo one is rapidly ageing
and the Korean one is keen to become increasingly part
of the Australian landscape?
They have taken over 6 months simply talking through the possibilities
with the Church Councils; getting to know one another;
exploring how it might work,
looking at a model of worship which will ensure everyone feels included
by using language translations
and a million other details,
but at the heart of the move is the willingness of both existing groups
to change in order to be more accommodating to the other.
And that has to be a little sign of God's kingdom in our time and place.

I am not suggesting that is the way forward for Pymble,
but it is a good example of a church very similar to ours,
stepping out to do something different
in order to include another group, and in doing so,
more accurately reflect their local community.

So as we once again experience God's loving inclusion of us
around the table today,
may we give thanks and reflect how it is
that we may mirror God's welcome of us, and include others.