

Matthew 7: 21-19

Pymble 22.4.18

From set of beliefs to a way of life

Looking ahead this week,

I realized we have 3 weeks before our Mother's Day
and Grandparent and Godparent service

and I thought that might allow us to explore together
the 3 themes that I wrote about in last week's pew sheet.

They come from the book the Heart and Mind group is reading:

The Great Spiritual Migration by Brian McLaren. ¹

The migration McLaren refers to is the movement or the journey
individual Christians and the Church need to take
in order to make Christianity **vibrant, truer to its founder
and relevant to our wider world.**

So I will take one of his migration themes each week
over the next 3 Sundays;

I'm departing from the lectionary and exploring this theme
for a few reasons:

One, because I think it fits well with where we are at the moment –
planning for our future, reflecting on the role of the Village, discerning what a fresh
expression of the Church might look like in our area.

All these issues point to us thinking deeply
about the nature of the Church.

Two, I wasn't overly excited about preaching on the coming lectionary readings –
is it OK for me to admit that?!

And three, personally, I was filled with hope as I read McLaren's book
and I'd love to share the concepts, that you might also get excited.

Actually, if you're like me, it is easy to get a bit depressed
over the state of the Church in the Western world
and it is difficult to see a way out of the mess we have created.

But McLaren offers a considered and practical path,
not only to renew the Church for its own sake
but also for the Church to play a significant role
in contributing to a better world.

And that's the sort of thing that gets me excited.

And so the first migration McLaren outlines is the spiritual migration
**from thinking about our faith primarily as a set of beliefs
to understanding our faith as a way of life.**

Now, if this is obvious to you, then good, and I am very pleased
but let us at least acknowledge that many, many people,

¹ The Great Spiritual Migration, Brian D McLaren. Hodder & Stoughton 2017

both within the church and outside it,
view Christianity chiefly as list of beliefs to be accepted.
After all, Christians identify themselves as “believers”;
on most Church websites
there will be a large section clearly outlining, “*What we Believe*”;
and historically the Protestant church has split
over numerous doctrinal matters,
elevating beliefs to the determining factor
in whether or not you can belong somewhere.
Everywhere we look in the church we see the primacy of beliefs.

Now before I oppose this view, let me just clarify, beliefs *do* matter.
It is important to know what we believe and why.
And what we don’t believe and why.
Beliefs shape the way we see the world and how we act.
So please don’t hear this as an attack on the importance of beliefs.
But in the Scriptures beliefs are always *subordinate* to practice.
It is a matter of priority.
And when we promote Christianity as a set of beliefs,
especially beliefs about things we can’t objectively prove
like the trinitarian nature of God,
the return of Jesus,
or the virgin birth,
then little wonder most people question its relevance to their lives.

This observation is not really new,
but this misrepresentation of the nature of our faith
is one regularly being identified by those taking stock
of where Christianity is at present,
perhaps especially where it is in the US.
For example, I recall Marcus Borg’s book, *The Heart of Christianity*,
almost 15 years ago, opening with a similar point.
He relates his own experience
of having a conversation on a plane with a woman
who had recently converted to Buddhism, because she said,
*“Buddhism is more a way of life, not like Christianity,
which is really just about what you believe.”*
Like it or not, most people “out there” and perhaps plenty “in here”
would say Christianity is first and foremost about what you believe.

One of the problems with beliefs being so central,
is that we can spend all our time ensuring that we have the right ones.
We can spend enormous energy reading and studying and thinking
and arguing about beliefs to the extent that we imagine
this is what being faithful is all about.

But as Jesus pointed out to the scribes and Pharisees,
you can have all the right words
but still not be **doing** what God wants.
This is the meaning of Jesus' short pointed parable
about the 2 sons who were asked by their Father
to go and work in the field.
One says yes, but doesn't go;
the other says no, but in the end decides to go and work.
Who has done the will of the father?
Only the one who has acted, despite saying the wrong thing.

Another issue with beliefs is that they are subject to change.
Someone at *Heart and Mind* related the story of a Catholic friend
asking a priest about the church's attitude to purgatory.
"Oh," he said, "*we don't believe in that anymore.*"
Of course his nonchalant response
belied centuries of theological argument
but it does show that denominations can alter their views.

But more personally, we too can find our beliefs changing.
We can find that what we believe on Sunday
doesn't make sense in our life during the week;
we can discover our beliefs don't stack up
with what we have come to know about the world through our experience,
or critically, we can find our treasured Christian beliefs
coming into conflict with our treasured Christian ethic of love.
McLaren relates, for example, how his belief that gay people
were somehow evil and perverted, began to crumble
when dear Christian people he knew came out to him as gay.
No longer was this an abstract theoretical matter;
now it involved how he treated a good friend or family member.
I had a very similar experience in my time at theological college.
I began my studies thoroughly convinced "gay was not OK" –
it really was the watershed issue –
but towards the end of my studies a close friend came out as gay
and I had to think whether that one fact of his sexuality
now made him unsuitable for ministry.
I concluded it didn't.
My beliefs had changed.

And yours may change too in many areas:

- not just on social issues but on things like
- 6-day creation
- Believers being raptured at the end times
- Jesus' death as a sacrifice that appeases an angry God
- how we are to read the Bible

- and so many more.

When we realise that, historically,
Christians have defended cherished beliefs about slavery,
racism and white supremacy,
the genocide of indigenous peoples,
and the subordination of women,
then we can see why we need to hold our beliefs lightly,
and allow them to respond to new evidence and fresh information.

Well, if beliefs are not absolutely central to making us Christian,
then what is?

Of course it is our actions, our way of living, our Christian practice.

Jesus in Matthew's gospel makes this abundantly clear when,
at the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount,
he says these absolutely shocking words,

*"Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord,
will enter the kingdom of heaven,
but only those who DO the will of my Father."*²

To push the point, he goes on to tell the parable
about the men building their houses
on the rock and on the sand respectively.

Many of us would have sang this song at Sunday School
"the wise man built his house upon the rock..."

but we may have missed the crucial point that the only difference
between the 2 builders was whether or not
they put Jesus' words into action.

Actions. Not good works to make us acceptable to God,
but actions borne of our trust in Jesus' words.

So much of the New Testament has this corrective:

Jesus calling us to *follow* him;

Paul speaking about the supremacy of love even over faith and hope;

James telling us true religion is tending the widow and the orphan;

John explaining we can't claim to love the invisible God

if we can't help our very visible brother and sister in need.

Christianity is more than belief;

it is the way of love expressed in every aspect of our life;

love for God,

for our fellow Christian;

for our neighbour;

even love for our enemy.

² Matthew 7: 21-27

It is this daily practice of love –
expressed at home, at work, at church,
and with all those with whom we come into contact –
it is this practice that is at the core of a living faith.

And so McLaren speaks of local churches being schools of love.
It is in our congregations that we hear about,
and then practice and learn, what it means to love;
how to forgive, how to grow in patience and kindness,
learning not to be divisive or rude,
practicing hospitality, and so on.

To mark the difference between a focus on beliefs and a focus on love,
he cites the website of a church he attended.

*It's probably important to start by making it clear that we're not the ones who
'finally got the Bible right.' Neither do we possess the secret to life, exclusive
access to God or 'Seven steps to satisfaction.' We are, however, powerfully drawn
to the person of Jesus, his teaching and even more so, his life...
We think the truth about life may just be love and love may just be the way.*

*...The way of Jesus is a lifestyle of holistic healing for individuals, families,
neighborhoods and nations. To follow this way is the countercultural road of
limitless forgiveness, radical acceptance, nonviolent peacemaking, abundant
generosity and sacrificial love. Salvation isn't a contractual relationship of filling in
the right theological answers or behaving the correct way, but an ongoing
covenantal relationship with our Creator...³*

And so it goes on, highlighting the active road of faith,
not simply a list of the important beliefs people must have
in order to become members.

The 2 ways couldn't be more different, and importantly,
lead to very different expressions of faith,
and it is no secret which one is the most attractive for people today.

Friends, beliefs matter, but in the West,
for some reason the pendulum has swung
and our believing has got out of balance with our actions.
Our faith has gone out of our hands and feet, eyes and ears,
and has instead landed squarely in our heads, where it often stays.
But don't be deceived;
Faith is to be lived
and we can always learn to love in ever-deeper ways.

³ ibid p.56, quoting the website of Eastlake Community Church, Bothell, Washington