

St. John's, Toorak

Sunday, 2 September, 2018 *Start of Stewardship Month*

I grew up in Elsternwick, as many of you know, in a street named St. James Parade, that you drive into if you keep driving south down Orrong Road. I described exactly this when I was new to Toorak and buying chocolates in Haigh's and an elderly woman in the store remarked "Oh, the *other* end of Orrong Road," as if my end of Orrong Road was some by-the-creek slum swarming with deplorables. Boy do appearances count to some.

Growing up in Elsternwick most of my neighbours were Jewish, liberal or Orthodox, and Saturday mornings were the best time to shop if you wanted to avoid traffic. I paid my way through theological school by waiting on tables and pouring drinks at 'Tudor Court,' a reception venue in an old stately Queen Anne style home on Kooyong Road that hosted school dances, wedding receptions, fashion shows and most of all, events for the local Jewish community. In fact I was there so much, and they were there so much, that I was on first name terms with half the community and indeed their rabbis, one of whom used to grill me on my Hebrew Bible knowledge as I delivered plates to tables, three on my left arm, one in my right hand. On evenings where the Orthodox were celebrating, and boy did they know how to party, everything awash in Manischewitz and this mad clarinetist belting out Hava Nagila that would have the dance floor literally sagging under the weight of dancing guests.

To cater for the Orthodox, the kitchen would be literally divided in half, late in the afternoon, one half declared

kashrut or kosher, the other non-kosher. And a rabbi would be installed in the kitchen for the evening to ensure that what was kosher was kosher and what was not was not and never the twain should meet. He sat, like a tennis linesman, in between these two kitchens, a tiny, wiry, sparrow-like man and barked orders at the chefs and wait staff, most of whom were not Jewish and had little idea of kosher protocol. And because he wasn't very sensitive, neither were the staff, and whenever he would get up and check the fridge or take a close look at the now alfoiled sinks or go to the loo, the chefs would throw whole roast chickens from one side of the kitchen to other, mouthing 'kosher' as it flew one side, and 'non-kosher' as it flew the other.

They were good times and great parties and the curious restrictions of Orthodox customs seemed to bring more life than it took away.

Jesus was concerned with exactly that. Not the throwing of roast chickens but the life given, or taken away, by religious custom. And Mark in his gospel records an occasion where Jesus rightly condemns such religious custom that has become an end in itself. In other words where the washing of pots and the cleaning of utensils had become more important than how a person behaves or what they have, as it were, in their heart. Where clean pots are more important than a hateful or greedy heart. He explains that what goes into the mouth of a person – food – is of little consequence compared to that which comes out of a person's mouth – edifying or denigrating speech, gossip and spite or praise and support.

He goes further by saying that the character of a person is judged by what is in here (the heart) rather than the strict

observance of what happens in the kitchen. The religious person must be determined by their heart driving their faith rather than the mere observance of religious niceties.

We ourselves know this to be true. How someone pours your tea is a minor consideration if they're a terrible neighbour. The action, the life, the *lifestyle*, speaks more than the adherence to rule. St. Paul in his letters spends a good deal of time considering this, making the point in his letter to the Romans that indeed it is the adherence to the letter of the law (such as the ritual washing of pots) that actually brings death; rather it is the Spirit that brings the opposite, life. In life we need follow the *spirit* of the law rather than the *letter* of the Law.

I have to say that I find this enormously helpful as we begin our stewardship month here at St. John's and enjoy honest and frank conversations about how we support our beautiful church and each other. How we literally *act* as a result of the faith in our hearts.

A faithful life must be a generous life. Generous to God, first and foremost, and generous to God's mission on earth. Generous to each other, generous to ourselves, giving away more than holding to.

The Bible is full of directives about how we should be generous, and just in case we don't get the hints, is specific, with hard numbers to work with. The biblical gold standard concerning our giving has always been a tithe, that is, one-tenth of one's income be given away. This is not a big demand. 2 bucks in every twenty, four in every forty and so on.

We can choose to look all nice and benevolent to our church on the outside, being good attenders, pitching in moving the bbq, laughing at the vicar's jokes, saying our prayers, being good Christian people. But if we're not generous people, we're washing the outside of the pots as it were, keeping the law and not living by the spirit of the law. We are in fact missing out on a particularly joyous part of a life of faith, for it is, as the old saying goes, better to give than to receive.

Being Christian should be a joy, a delight, a life lived in the light of the endless love of an endless God. God, who give us everything we have, are and do, all of this, given to us, rightly expects of us a similar generosity: a generosity of spirit, and a generous heart.

So after the manner of God we need be generous to those with whom we worship, to those who come to the church for the solace for God and generous to any in need. Furthermore we need be generous in our charitable giving, quick to give away that which is given to us, rather than holding it close-fisted to ourselves.

During this stewardship month, when we consider prayerfully our generosity to God through our giving to this our beautiful church and community, please do support, as best you can, the life and ministry here. Really think about it and commit to it. Its life and our life together, really depends upon everyone one of us translating the importance of God and God's church in our life into our pledging and our giving. St. Teresa once remarked that God has no other hands or feet on earth other than ours by which to serve and care for humankind: this stewardship season let us not only be generous in our giving but also see ourselves and our

church as those very hands and feet to each other and the community which we serve.