

Year B, Thirds Sunday of Easter Acts 3.12-19, Psalm 4, Luke 24b.36b-48

Peace be with you. And also with you.

May the words of ...

Today is the first day of this year's stewardship campaign, which will run to the Sunday before Pentecost, the Sunday after the Ascension Day with the blessing of the pledges on the Feast of Pentecost, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the disciples gathered in Jerusalem for the Shavuot a Jewish spring harvest thanksgiving festival.

It is an unusual time, the Easter season, for us at Christ Church to be considering stewardship. More often than not we have held stewardship campaigns in the late summer or early autumn as we moved towards Harvest Thanksgiving, but this year we are holding it in the spring during the Easter season of the Church. This fact is an opportunity as well as a challenge.

The title of this sermon could read *Stewardship in the light of the Resurrection*. What is meant? What is meant is how does Christ's rising from the dead, his being raised from the dead, shed light on how we order our affairs as Christians, as members of the body of Christ and more specifically as members of a local church with responsibilities that we are being called to take up and live out.

The focus of this year's campaign will be as already stated on the finances of the church. We are already considering our stewardship of creation and the environment having made a commitment a few years back. Under Monika Weber-Fahr ably assisted by Rosie Evans we are making progress. There are of course the other two areas of stewardship that we will need to consider on another occasion, namely time and talent, but today and over the coming weeks the focus is unashamedly financial.

There are a number of reasons for this. The main one being our desire to put Christ Church's finances on a sure and sound footing for the next twenty years. I am sure that we have the capacity to do this, if each plays their part. The resources are there. Can they be given freely, joyfully and sacrificially in the light of Christ's rising from the tomb? In the light of the light of the resurrection?

Where did I get the figure twenty from, I can hear some of you asking? Twenty years in the old reckoning is a generation. We want to strengthen the finances so that they are sound for the coming generation. Members of which are already amongst us. Ten years seemed too short and a focus simply on making up the present

shortfall unambitious. This campaign is not about plugging holes. We want to run the race that is set before us and not simply stagger along.

The best way and the right way to address the finances of Christ Church is to call on all the members, friends and associates to consider and then commit to planned giving. There are still a high number of people as outlined in this week's email that do not give regularly. Calling on them must be the first step to putting our finances in order, which is to put them on a sound and sure footing, so that everyone who appreciates the church - simply as a presence in Vienna or because it is their life - are all committed to giving and giving regularly which means giving at least monthly and throughout the year. This is the first big step and we need to concentrate on this goal. Given the pandemic and as we move ever more towards a cash free economy, electronic standing orders are the way forward.

I want to thank everyone who responded to the 2019 campaign. Again, as stated in this week's email the response then to move to monthly standing orders helped us weather the pandemic better than could be expected at the time. As you will appreciate with the pandemic dragging on, we are faced with an even greater challenge. Open or cash collections although still possible have dwindled. It is urgent that if you aren't already giving monthly via standing order that you go to your bank on Monday morning and set up a standing order, or if you do online banking to set up a standing order online. I reckon that there are at least 50 persons/couples/families that ought to be doing this.

The other aspect of the campaign is to call on present members to review their giving to the church. Is it generous? Is it sacrificial? It is joyful? Is it enough given the precarious state of the church's finances with its reliance on the bazaar and the shop both of which have been affected by the pandemic? Again, a great thank you to all who have contributed to keeping the shop open during the pandemic when possible, as well as a thank you to all involved in the pop-up bazaar, which was held in the church centre back in December. Creativity undergirded by unfailing commitment has been the order of the day.

As I lay in bed thinking about what to say, hoping for a little help from above, I looked back over the last twenty years of our common ministry in Vienna. What have we weathered? 9/11 in 2002 and the ensuing wars, the financial crisis of 2008, the migrant challenge of 2014 and presently the pandemic dating back to December 2019 to name a few. In this time other churches in Vienna have started up and folded, but we are still here carrying out a faithful ministry in and out of season. We are not a start-up, nor are we in our last throes. Our commitment to 's Häferl, the soup kitchen with a difference has continued throughout the pandemic. The creation commitment anchored in our mission statement has been filled with life. In

2020 we moved quickly to online services and only a little later we already had the capacity to livestream services from the church, which remains a priority despite the extra costs and work it entails week by week. We continue to seek to improve sound quality. We are committed to relaunching the magazine, as soon as possible. We remain committed to the Ministerial Experience Scheme as we give thanks for Ben, Gabe and Rosie, as well as Philip. We remain committed to appointing a Youth and Young Adults leader. The pandemic has made it difficult to plan and it can be wearing, but the above will give us all a flavour of a vibrant community facing specific challenges. It is impressive in its own way, but as I said last week what we call the spiritual not only undergirds the priorities we set, but also how we order our stewardship and in the light of this campaign our finances vis a vis the church and particularly the local church: Christ Church.

I have front-loaded this sermon with an outline of this year's stewardship campaign taking the liberty to be longer than usual. Admittedly, we are only looking, at one aspect of our finances as they relate to our giving to the local church. All our finances should be God centred, being ordered in the light of the resurrection. The first clue comes in Jesus' resurrection greeting to a group of followers who are anxious, fearful and unsure of the future. Peace be with you! Today, I am grateful that Jesus uses this greeting as he comes to his followers as the Risen One. The reason for this is that Jesus gives us a peace that the world cannot give. He does not give as the world gives. What he gives does not perish. It belongs to no one, but it can define all people. One of the things that we learn as Christians is that our true peace is in God as mediated by Jesus, as we abide in Him.

The world, as in "not as the world gives", is a catch phrase encompassing possessions, careers, work, money, race and relationships. "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." The peace we seek and the peace we live out is gifted. It is not earned, but we can rest in it and live out of it. Living in and living out this shalom is how we can be and are a blessing to others.

Through the resurrection God in Christ is opening up a new way. I have been using the image of giving birth over the last few weeks. And it is a useful image, because the birth of a child means the world of the parents can never be the same. Everything needs to be reexamined with endless adjustments being made to priorities, values and desires. A child is a life-giving being. It awakes us wonder, tenderness and joy and in even the most despondent a yes to life, even if it be for a brief moment.

The invitation to saying the Lord's Prayer during the Easter season begins "rejoicing in God's New Creation, we pray with confidence as our Saviour has taught us." What

is this New Creation?" I am sure some, possibly many of you are asking. It is that sin and death, which Paul calls the last enemy have been vanquished, conquered, overcome... We are not earthbound, but we are forever heaven bound. The Easter Vigil epistle makes it clear, "The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God." (Romans 6.10) We are living to God, who is the source of all life.

Some of you will have noticed that I attached extracts from a book review to this week's mailing. The book is entitled *Eternal Life*. This was deliberate, because what it means to be part of the New Creation is not live for this life alone, but in the words of a favourite hymn of mine,

Now is eternal life,
If risen with Christ we stand,
In him to life reborn,
And holden in his hand;
No more we fear death's ancient dread,
In Christ arisen from the dead.

Yes, here we talk about eternal life. Here, we believe in eternal life. Here, we allow ourselves to be shaped by the assurance of eternal life. The conversation we enjoy, the friendships we nurture here, the priorities we set, the giving we practise speak of this new life. The apostolic witness invites us to live life with confidence in the light of the resurrection.

Again St Paul, who was nurtured as much as we are by the telling of the Jesus story, the story of a crucified Anointed One writes, "If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied." (1 Corinthians 15.9) I appreciate that this view is puzzling, perplexing and disturbing, but it is the one in which we move and have our being. The Church, its people, its centre - Christ, its power - the Spirit, do not fit into this world, but all these call us to live toward the other openly, sacrificially and generously, but always in reference to God who gives life, sustains life and reconciles this life to himself.

The Easter tomb, a tomb that is not empty, is a reminder to us to roll away the stones that we have rolled before our minds, hearts and all that hinders us from living, while calling on the power of God's great grace. If we have painted ourselves into a corner, if we have sealed ourselves in, if we have withdrawn into ourselves, the world that we have arranged for ourselves the open tomb invites us to see for ourselves in the place reserved for the dead that he is not here, he is risen and to go out into the new day, the eighth day, the New Creation with a new identity

grounded in Christ. In the words of a beloved hymn, this new reality “Demands my soul, my life, my all.”

A well-known public and controversial figure who is teetering on becoming a Christian finds the message of the Good News of Christ so attractive that he is almost persuaded that what hinders him is the lack of transformation that he encounters in those who call themselves Christians. He says, “There’s no limit to what would happen if you acted like God existed. . . Maybe it’s not reasonable to say to believers, you aren’t sufficiently transformed for me to believe that you believe in God or that you believe the story that you’re telling me. . . the way you live isn’t sufficient testament to the truth.” This is not a new charge. It rings true in relation to oneself. It is therefore a serious charge and one that we must ever be giving attention to. Without transformed hearts and minds, transformed by the perspective of a new creation our giving will change little. The hallmarks of joyful, generous and sacrificial giving will be missing, a sense of duty coupled with joy absent.

Does the resurrection open to us new realities, new perspectives, new values? The answer is a resounding yes. In these we are live and they change how we order our lives. The challenge at this time is for all of us to order our lives in this light the resurrection, to be transformed, by God’s transforming great grace and power. May our lives, including our giving be equal witness that we have been tasked to make known assured that our present and our future our secure in God.

Peace be with you! And also with you!

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!