

CHOSEN

Sunday 14th May 2017

1 Peter 2:2-10

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"Life begins at forty". As a young lad, I remember my father saying this to me quite frequently. On reflection, I guess Dad was suggesting that, given an increase in life expectancy, those who are forty years old have a lot to look forward to in life.

However, I think Dad was also saying 40 is a kind of "turning point". Our first forty years of life teach us so much. We spend the next forty years reflecting on that learning, growing forward out of what we have learnt and sharing it with others. Here one observer says: *"the first forty years of life give us the text: the next thirty supply the commentary."*

The number 40 is significant in the Bible. It is often related to waiting, to preparation or to a time of testing, trial or probation. Moreover, the Bible often resorts to the number 40 when starting a new chapter or phase in the history of salvation.

So, we are informed that the Flood of Noah lasted 40 days. Jesus was presented in the temple 40 days after his birth, Jesus fasted for 40 days in the desert and Jesus ascends to the father 40 days after his resurrection. Meanwhile in the tradition of the church the period we observe as Lent is 40 days.

Moses was 40 years old when he was called by God. After killing an Egyptian, Moses flees into the desert for 40 years before returning to lead his people out of captivity. Then the Hebrews wander in the desert for 40 years before entering the promised land. King David's reign lasted 40 years and it was 40 years after the crucifixion of Jesus that the city of Jerusalem was sacked by the Romans and the magnificent temple was destroyed.

Meanwhile in exactly 40 days time we will celebrate the 40th anniversary or 40 years of the Uniting Church.

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With this in mind, some may well think turning 40 is when things really start to happen. After all, we have experience on our side, we are, supposedly, more mature and are apparently better equipped for what is to follow.

However, others may suggest turning 40 is akin to being “over the hill”. Here we are said to turn a corner in life. We go into overdrive and begin to cruise more warily through life meaning such things such as courage, vision, creativity and the will for adventure give way to vigilance, prudence, caution and discretion. From 40 on it’s a different way of approaching things. It’s a different manner of seeing and living life.

Indeed, in the life of the church it may be said that the under 40’s want to get on with things, they yearn for change and long to turf out those things which are tired and tested.

Meanwhile over 40’s tend to want to hang on to things, maintain that which is familiar and, with an eye to realism, practicality and a more astute clear sightedness, cautiously navigate the way forward.

Where do you stand? We need to be careful about making generalizations. But the idealist and realist, the stargazer and the pragmatist, the radical and the conservative, the impatient and the patient all do exist within the church. And I am sure you sit somewhere here on pendulum.

I remember being 34 year old idealist who travelled off to Indonesia to change the world. My wife and I had such high hopes. We cradled a real vision for justice and peace as we took up an appointment in the remote, war-impacted island of Timor. Now, some 33 years later (after I have well and truly tipped over the 40 mark!) my approach to ministry is more measured.

Here I have accumulated the experience of living in another country, speaking a different language, being part of a community that was highly militarized and understanding more about what it’s like to be a minority in a predominantly Muslim country. It doesn’t mean my commitment to Christ is any less, but it does mean I see things differently as respect for the other, making the time to listen and a preference for the tortoise rather than the hare governs my life at present.

For you see, we are all members of the one team – under 40’s and over 40’s, radicals and conservatives, dreamers and realists, doers and listeners, stargazers and pragmatists. We all have our part to play. To see it any other way, I believe, would mean the church becomes less than it’s meant to be.



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This is what is being said to a group of Christians in the First Letter of Peter. Probably written in Rome some 40 to 70 years after Christ and addressed to isolated Christian communities in what is now northern Turkey, this beautiful, most compelling letter encourages its audience in Christian living.

These Christians are addressed as “living stones” who cluster around Christ, the cornerstone, to form Christian community. Unlike the magnificent temple in Jerusalem, which had now been destroyed by the Romans, this community of living stones is the place where God is present.

Moreover, while the temple in Jerusalem had a hierarchy of priests who interceded on behalf of the people to God, Christian community is now the means by which people enter into a relationship with God. In that sense, Peter is saying we are all priests, we all have the privilege of standing before God and entering into a living in relationship with God.

And in all of this, Peter says every person who participates in this community are on the same team. For, in this team, everyone is chosen by God to be there. Verse 9 of our text today highlights this:

“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people,”



The word “chosen” comes from the Greek “ek-lego”, “ek” meaning “out of” and “lego” meaning to move to a conclusion. In other words, to be chosen by God is to be called out with a definite intention in mind. And that intention is to become a follower of Jesus Christ.

This means each one of us, as members of God’s community, are called out by God for the specific purpose of following Jesus. Moreover, this is a statement of who we are. It’s a definition of what we are meant to be. Each one of us - you and me - are singled out by God, we are called by God to be God’s people in this place!

Sometimes “chosen” is substituted with the word “elect”. And while these two words are interchangeable, “elect” throws up connotations of being exclusive, insular and separate from those around us.

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The American Standard Version of the Bible translates the text as “elect” while another English translation uses the term “special”. However, most translations, including the New International, the New Revised Standard, the King James and the Message stick with “chosen”.

Here it’s important to understand that being “chosen” does not mean we are any better than others. To be “chosen” does not mean we are more worthy or holier than the person next to us. Christian community is not an exclusive club where membership is offered only to some. And, again I emphasize, we are all called. We are all called out, we are all chosen to be part of a community that does not build walls.

Importantly, in this community of chosen people we encounter Paul’s words where it is said:

“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28).

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we are called, we are chosen to be God’s people. And this means an end to insularity, provincialism, small-mindedness and parochialism. It also means an end to the idea that we cannot have fellowship with others because we are not of the same mind or the same kind.

To embrace such a negative, blinkered view moves us away from what it means to be the church. Here we actually move towards sectarianism and the devolution of the church into a like-minded, theologically conformist fellowship where the Holy Spirit is gaged and stifled.

Sadly, the Christian Church, God’s people, the Body of Christ, is blighted with such things. I remember many years ago a group of students living in church accommodation in Newtown were instructed not to attend Uniting Church services on campus at Sydney University. This was a time when my wife, Laurel, was chaplain. Uniting Church approaches were considered to be doctrinally suspicious. Such an instruction really hurt. For my wife and I it really bit at the core of what it means to follow Jesus.

I am sure some of you have similar stories to tell. The truth of the matter is that we all, in our differences, whether they be in matters of doctrine, age, gender, sexual orientation, political preference or cultural background, matter to God. And because of this, we are ALL called, we are ALL chosen!

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And there is more to say here. In all our differences – and today I specifically refer to age differences, every one of us has place. Every one of us has role. Every one of us has a contribution to make.

So, whether you are a stargazer or a hard-headed realist, you have a place. Whether you are a radical, tugging at the bit to critique the status-quo and turn things upside down or a conservative wanting to value the past and steer a cautious path forward, you have a place.

Whether you are progressive longing to prod and to challenge or whether you are a traditionalist desiring to highlight that which is regarded as foundational, you have a place.

Whether you under 40 and want to stir things up or are whether you are over 40 and wish to maintain a “steady as she goes” approach, you have a place!

For, what matters most is that God wants you. God has chosen you. Every one of us, as different, as painfully irritating we might be to the other and as how threatening or challenging our differences may appear, belongs to and has been claimed by God!

Each and every one of us is called and is chosen by God to be God’s people. It’s as simple and it’s as profound as that!

For, as Peter says:

“But you are chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” (1 Peter 2:9).

Amen.

