

Sermon: Thanks in hard places

*Silvia Purdie, Cashmere Presbyterian Church, Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2018*

Let me take you back with me a few years. 15, 16, 17 years ... to when I had 3 small boys. We were living in Wainuiomata – anyone been to Wainuiomata, where the girls are smarter? Chris was the lay minister for the Wainui congregation. We arrived with one little boy and we left 5 years later with 3 little boys. We lived in the manse, across the road from the church, and both Aaron and Ben were born in that house. It was a cool spot, tucked into the valley, with bush up the back and a stream that ran behind the church, eventually coming out on the wild south coast of the North Island.

In that house Chris figured out how to write sermons – with a bit of help from me, of course! – and together we figured out how to be parents, with a bit of help from the Playcentre and a wonderful woman called Viv who looked after the boys 2 days a week. Mostly, though, it was me and the boys, and as anyone with small children will tell you, it is Full On. For nearly a year I had 3 under 5. The simplest of tasks was a heroic undertaking. Getting 3 boys out the door involved finding 6 socks, 6 shoes or booties, 3 hats, 3 water bottles, plus all the other paraphenalia you need with kids: nappies, dummies, wipes, nibbles ... and then finding them all over again when they take off their shoes while you're putting on their brothers shoes!

But staying home was not any easier. Daniel, our eldest, was quickly bored – except for Thomas the Tank Engine which he could watch endlessly. By 9 in the morning Daniel would be banging on the inside of the front door yelling to go Out!

But it's not so much the hard work that makes parenting small children hard. It is the relentlessness of it ... moments of quiet are rare, and the more children you have the rarer they are. You cannot even go to the toilet without a child crawling after you, or threatening to climb up the TV. Chris remembers walking into the lounge after a suspiciously long moment of quiet to find Daniel standing on top of the piano, very pleased with himself!

I loved being a mother to these 3 small dynamos. I loved the way they looked at me, the way they smelled (most of the time!), the way they kept changing and surprising you, the adventures every day. But I also found it hard. My faith had been a very important part of my life since I made a commitment to Jesus early in my teens. But while I was caring for young children was the time in my life when I found faith hardest to find. Mostly because I found solitude hardest to find. My sense of the presence of God had been nurtured in times of quiet and peace, and in times of worship, and mothering small children strips away everything that used to be normal, everything that used to sustain you. I didn't so much feel that God had abandoned me as much as I felt that God had got lost under the piles of dirty washing, crowded out by yelling babies, my connection to God disintegrating with the sheer exhaustion of it all.

I remember two things which kept my faith alive. One was the most simple of all prayers – thank you.

Paul in his letter to the Ephesians teaches them to give thanks in everything, for everything. This became woven in to the fabric of my life as a mother. When I had no other words, no other ways to pray, I could still say 'Thank you'.

#### **Dirty dishes prayer**

***Thank Heaven for dirty dishes, they have a tale to tell***

***Where other folks go hungry we are eating very well***

***With home and health and happiness we shouldn't want to fuss***

***By this stack of evidence God's very good to us***

But of course some things are easier to be grateful for than others. A first step or a sudden smile, sure, of course we are grateful. A vomiting child at 3am not so much. It is hard to feel grateful for anything when your body is screaming for sleep. But even buckets

of yucky nappies are worth saying thank you for. Even temper tantrums, even broken bones, even in the worst moments we can find gratitude.

On the night before he died, Jesus gathered with his friends, and he gave thanks. Even though he knew what was coming, he lifted up the cup and said, Thank you Father! The great prayers that John records in chapters 14 to 17 are filled with thanksgiving. How could he give thanks, knowing the pain that was coming his way?

How about you? Do you struggle to say ‘thank you’ sometimes? Can you be grieving for a loss, or worried for the future, and still say ‘thank you’?

I am packing up my home at the moment. When I heard we had to move out of our gorgeous home in Bowenvale, I confess that I got really quite upset. You have all had to move out of homes through earthquakes and changes – there’s a grief that comes with it, and the more you enjoyed a home the harder it is to leave it. Healthy grieving, for any loss, involves being honest with how you feel, whatever you feel ... and through the honesty gratitude emerges. You know how it is. We grieve, we get cross, things are the way they are, too bad, and little by little you feel more able to say thank you. Maybe that’s God’s way with us, that as healing comes everything else fades away except the thank you. I hope that when I step over that one-way bridge at the end of my life on earth that I will step right out of all regret, all fear, all loss, all disappointment, and all there will be will be one vast ‘thank you’.

For all is gift, and all is given, and we are gift and God is giver and life is given and all that remains is gratitude.

This is what we mean when we call Holy Communion, ‘Eucharist’. Eucharist is Greek for gratitude. Thanksgiving. The words of Communion are called the Great Thanksgiving. When we gather at this table we enter a space in which all of history, all of creation, all the pain and brokenness, all that you are and all that will be is declared to be a story of gratitude. Thank you, Father, we say, with Jesus. Thank you for Jesus. That’s it, really.

I said there were two things that sustained my faith through those crazy busy mothering years. The first was gratitude. The second was Eucharist. I didn’t get to worship very often but when I did, I was hungry for the bread and the wine. I needed the bread. I was hungry to be fed – not my stomach but my soul. “Come to me” said Jesus, “and you will be filled.” “I am the bread of life” said Jesus.

Jesus used the simplest of words. The brilliance of John’s gospel is the simplicity of the language. I am the bread. Come. Eat. Be fed. Be raised up. This is Jesus, his body. He is here, really here. When you take hold of your small piece of cut white bread, you are holding Jesus. This is what we describe with the word ‘sacrament’ – it is a sign that is both a symbol and the real thing at the same time. Not because of any magic words I say. Not because you have been good enough. Not because of anything we pray or say or do. Just because Jesus said it. I am the bread of life. And it was true when he spoke it and it is true for every and everywhere. When we gather in his name, and give thanks, he is with us. Jesus our risen Saviour is here in this bread, on this day, for you, in you.