

Sermon for the 29<sup>th</sup> January 2012.. Fourth Sunday of Epiphany

Teachings on Discerning the Way of Christ.

Last week your Building Committee sent representatives of all four founding congregations to hear presentations from three architects on how they would handle our project. It was our job to listen carefully to all that they said, gather all the information, feelings, inklings of the Spirit as we could, then on Thursday night we met with the rest of the committee and together tried to discern which one was right for us.

When you choose between a good apple and a rotten apple it is easy. We had to choose between good and good.

St Paul is talking about this when it seems to be arguing about vegetarianism. In fact it was the case in the ancient Greek world that the temple sacrifices, of which there were many every day, were functionally abattoirs. That was where you went to buy meat. Is it OK to eat meat which was slaughtered by being sacrificed to an idol? Well, that depends, says Paul. Theologically he says there is only one god, so all these others don't exist, so you have actually sacrificed to thin air. Really, then, it is no problem. But many new Christians are still habituated to the idea that these gods are real, and they have made a choice to leave an old god and follow the God of Jesus. To eat meat would be like going back to the old temple and denying their new commitment. So it is a big problem. How do you decide? Paul says use love to decide. Would you lead someone you love to do something that would hurt them? No. So don't lead them to be distressed by having to deal with "sacrificed" meat. Just be vegetarian for their sake.

Not what is right theologically. Not what suits you best. Do what is loving and respectful of your fellow Christian.

Some of us favoured one architect, others another. Neither was bad, both were good. I began to listen out for who would be upset if we chose one way or another. I began to wonder which of these would engage most of our congregation in the design process. I began to try figuring out which of these people would feel most at home with Grace Church people, and they with him.

In the Deuteronomy reading we get a warning about prophets. Essentially it warns religious leaders not to put something in to God's mouth which actually belongs in theirs. Sometimes in churches arguments end suddenly when someone says, "This is what God wants." How do you know what God wants? What would God say? Mostly I think God has few concrete opinions about most of our decisions. I think God would have been OK with any of our architects. But it is important to wonder what God wants. In this instance I think God would want this building to do two things. God would want the process of designing it to be a way for us to draw away from being of four different sets of allegiances, and move towards a shared single future vision. I think God would want that to be a time for each of us to ask

ourselves where our church is heading? Why? And how can I help? Secondly I think God would want us to build a church which is about the things Jesus did. He preached and prayed; Worship. He sought out the broken, the sick and the outcasts and made friends with them; Outreach. And he taught, trained and empowered, through his Holy Spirit, the most unlikely people, to do his work after him; Discippling. And he gave himself away, utterly, for the sake of those people and for us, so we could give ourselves away for him.

So I think we needed to choose an architect that would understand that kind of thing, and help put that into the walls and doors, the rooms and the windows, the plumbing and the wiring of this new church.

The Gospel has an odd moment about discerning. First of all, every one felt there was something different about Jesus. He had an authority...it came from deep inside him. But then someone with an "unclean spirit" discerned even better, and shouted, "I know who you are!" and named Jesus as divine, and as a threat. The anger or fear which lodged in this man had so scoured him inside that he saw the threat to his twisted way of life. "You will destroy us", which means, "You will upset our status-quo, you will force us to change, to repent, to become new, to give up our old ways and it will never be the same again. And if we cannot bend we will be broken" Sometimes discerning God's way is done by noticing our natural tendency towards comfort and our sense of resistance to the calling of God's grace. [I remember being infuriated by the realization that God could not possibly do anything but weep at the way we factory farm chickens. It was a small thing, but I like cheap eggs and cheap chicken on my plate! ]

There are things about the way Grace Church on Kennedy is going to turn out that make me uncomfortable. These discomforts are about the way it will force me out of my comfort-zone and make me take risks for Christ that I would rather have someone else take. There is a goodly chunk of my soul that wants to be in a quiet monastery away in the hills. The new Grace church is not going to accommodate my retreating nature. This sounds like God to me! Oh, dear!

I have used the present real issue of choosing an architect, both to let you all know what has been happening this week or two. And also to show that the teachings on discerning the Way of Christ are actually real and useable in daily life decisions. We are called not to be clever, or successful, or famous or hopeless. We are called to be Christ-like. We are called to be faithful in applying the Way of Jesus to the hundreds of decisions we make, both big and small.

If we are losing our lives for his sake, it means we are letting go of doing our living for our own benefit, and living each moment to emulate what we think Jesus might do, were he in our shoes. The more we do this, the more we offer God back the gift of ourselves, but this time, made out of the best material we can get hold of. We are making ourselves out of his Son, and into his Son. That is the daily worship which is beyond a building. It heals the sick, it is worship of the body and the soul, and it is being a disciple, and a teacher for Jesus.