



Rev Peter Beck
Let your heart keep my commandments
St Matthew's Day
Proverbs 3:1-6
Matthew 9:9-13
25 September 2022

A phrase from the inspirational Old Testament reading for today which has been living with me as I have thought about what to say today. – 'Let your heart keep my commandments' (Proverbs 3:1)

I am so pleased to be with you today. Thank you Helen for the invitation. The last time I preached here was I think at the 25th anniversary of the Community Church. For me today is a particularly significant day to come to this church, this flagship of the Spirit, this parish which stands for a vision of the gospel which is progressive, open and inclusive, committed to a vision of justice and peace, a vision of the world as God's love would have it be. A parish which over many years has acted on its rhetoric.

It is significant for me because 50 years ago on the 26 Sept 1972 I was made a deacon in the Church of God and committed myself to this same vision, to loosen the corsets of the church, to engage with the life of the city where I lived and minister to its needs, its people.

As I sat at my laptop writing this sermon this week I looked up at a photo on my window ledge of Nelson Mandela giving his one fist salute in this pulpit when he came here to thank New Zealand for our support for South Africa. There was a man who lived out the vision of the world as God's love would have it be. Today is also significant for me for the 30 September will be the second anniversary of the death of my dearest of friends, a former priest here and one of the finest men, priest and bishop I have ever known, who also sought to live out this vision – Jim White. Jim, I honour you, I love you, I pay my respects to you.

To come then to this place with all that it stands for in the life of this city and nation since 1904, is a privilege and is humbling. And so I pay my respects and honour this place, and those who gone before us, and you who are now the carriers of this Gospel to the world, a gospel which asserts that through Jesus Christ, life is stronger than death, love is stronger than hate. That all that

separates and injures and destroys is overcome by all that unites and heals and creates. That is our kaupapa and it calls for brave action in a world that is stepping deeper and deeper into tragedy.

Some would say that surrounded by all these high rise buildings, offices and apartments, St Matthew's is lost in the city centre. No, not so. Rather than lost, St Matts is immersed in the life of the city. You are immersed in the life of the city. This church and you its people are the original Sky Tower since 1905. Paul Reeves would speak of the life of the city flowing in and through this building. Yes. I remember Jim Wallis founder of Sojourners in the USA, an extremely important evangelical movement for justice and peace, coming here while I was Vicar and saying that our job was to take God into the sinful city. Well, I begged to differ. No, I said, I don't think we take God anywhere. God is in the midst of the city doing what God is doing. Our job is to seek out what God is up to, roll up our sleeves and join in. Archbishop Rowan Williams will speak of time when going about his ministry he might pause, touch someone on the shoulder and gently whisper 'ah, look at that'. There is God at work. Join in!

'Let your heart keep my commandments'. Mother Julian would say - Put your mind into your heart, and stand in the presence of God all day.

Well, what are we commanded to do but to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God.

And we Anglicans have our five marks of mission:

- To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
- To teach, baptise and nurture new believers
- To respond to human need by loving service
- To seek to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and to pursue peace and reconciliation
- To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and re-new the life of the earth
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Let your heart keep my commandments. From today's passage and over and over again in the scriptures, we are admonished: 'Therefore shall ye lay up these my words in your heart and in your soul, and bind them for a sign upon your hand, that they may be as frontlets between your eyes'

Matthew we are told in today's Gospel, was zapped. He must have been, to drop everything and follow Jesus. To quote 'and he said to him 'Follow me.' And he got up and followed him.' Wow. Didn't happen to me quite like that. But it did happen, as it happened to each one of us here in this church. At some point or other we made the choice to follow him. And every time I come to the Eucharist as we do today, Jesus is saying again and as if for the first time 'Follow me'. Today in heart and mind we can be zapped again!

When we gather to celebrate the Eucharist, when we say the great thanksgiving, consecrate these elements of bread and wine and share them, I think that is the most important event that is happening in the universe at that moment. We are being embraced in the unending love which flows through every atom of the universe, the love in which we live and move and have our being, the love which is made known in Jesus. That's what we are here for today - to lose and find ourselves in this great mystery, of life giving love and so for our hearts to be inspired by the truth of the gospel. And we may pray - Come to our hearts Lord Jesus, there is room in our hearts for thee, that we may be agents of change in the world, instruments of your peace.

Jesus says in this Eucharist, 'do this to remember me', to remember because I keep forgetting. My big problem, our big problem is forgetting that life is stronger than death, that love is stronger than hate. Do I really believe, 'Oh Lord I believe, help thou mine unbelief'. Do this to remember, that against all the odds, against all the gone-wrongness in what is happening in our world today, the evil that we are doing to one another and to our planet, and it is really scary, nevertheless all that separates and injures and destroys is and will be overcome by all that heals and unites and creates. The gift we are given of this certainty of this new life is not only in this moment as we celebrate the Eucharist. This is a sign that the Eucharist is in every moment, God's life, energy and love is being poured out in every moment.

Today once again, can I open my eyes, heart and being to realise and accept this gift that I might be an instrument of this love and life in this world. Once again and for the first time like Matthew to drop everything and follow him. I'm glad we have the confession at the beginning of the mass. You see, I know how much I fall short in my faithfulness. I know how much I get in the way of God's love, how much I mar the image of God in me. How about you? And so I pray the ancient Jesus prayer 'Lord Jesus Christ son of the living God have mercy on me a sinner'. And you know what? He does, he kind of says to me - It's OK. Pick yourself up, brush yourself down and start all over again. He says to me and you as he did to that sinner Matthew - follow me. 'Let your heart keep my commandments'.

A poem of the 16th century priest and poet, George Herbert, to end this sermon. In it he explores his own heart as he comes to mass. Love of course, here is Jesus, is God:

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,
 Guiltie of dust and sinne.
But quick-ey'd Love, observing me grow slack
 From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,

If I lack'd anything.

A guest, I answer'd, worthy to be here:
Love said, You shall be he.
I the unkinde, ungrateful? Ah, my deare,
I cannot look on thee.
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
Who made the eyes but I?

Truth Lord, but I have marr'd them: let my shame
Go where it doth deserve.
And knowe you not, sayes Love, who bore the blame?
My deare, then I will serve.
You must sit down and eat, sayes Love, and taste my meat:
So I did sit and eat.

[George Herbert]

So let us do just that. Eat of the bread of life and drink of the cup of salvation, and as we say amen, yes, can we be bold enough to emulate the words of St Joan in Bernard Shaw's play – 'In his strength I will dare and dare and dare until I die'. God bless you people of St Matthew-in-the-City. The world needs you