

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. *Amen*

A couple of years ago, at our annual Lay Reader's Seminar, the Reverend Tim Gaden ran a class on preaching to the Gospel. What he started with has stuck with me. Something along the lines of "*whatever the reading is that you are unpacking, the first thing to do is identify the Good News and the Bad News and there is the basis for your sermon.*"

So I looked for good news in today's readings and what leapt out at me was John 17, verse 11: *Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are.*

Ergo the disciples of then and now, belong to and are protected by God the Father at the request of his beloved son.

The bad news? Well I couldn't actually find any bad news in today's Gospel. But the reading began with "After Jesus had spoken these words" ... and those words are *The hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each one to his home, and you will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone because the Father is with me. ³³ I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!*

So I'm thinking the Bad news is that Jesus is no longer with them and the disciples will face persecution and will need courage to go out into the world fulfilling the challenge Jesus gave them to continue the work He had begun.

The reading from 1 Peter reinforces this.

Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. ⁹ Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters^[b] throughout the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. ¹⁰ And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.

Both Good news and bad news - God is in charge but beware, the Devil runs rampant. Oh and you will suffer.

It can be hard to trust and believe. Matthew tells us that even Jesus cried out to God asking why he had forsaken him at the end even though in prayer he had asked for mercy but said **yet not my will, but yours be done.**

And we often cry out ourselves, asking, *why do bad things happen to good people?* I don't know about you, but Jesus' statement **yet not my will, but yours be done** can be hard to believe will help.

Do we believe that "Life wasn't meant to be easy" or "that which does not kill you, makes you stronger? Or do we grieve for that which we don't understand? Do we

believe what Peter told us “And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.”

A couple of weeks ago, John, a dear friend of ours died. He was just 2 days shy of his 92nd birthday.

Before attending his funeral, I was going to use a musical reference of the song You raise me up, which Graham played for us a couple of weeks ago and which has been not far from my lips even before that. It seemed to be appropriate for Ascension week. And then, blow me down, *You raise me up* was the song John had chosen to accompany the photo presentation.

But then the recessional hymn was announced. It was *We shall go out with Joy* – a perfect musical reference. This was a song that he and our fellow cursillistas learned at our first cursillo weekend and sang at the multiple cursillo weekends at which we and he served on team. While it was sung with gusto and spoke volumes about his belief, I confess I was disappointed, and suspected that he would have been as well, as only Gordon and I clapped our hands along with the appropriate words.. (I’d do a Sue and sing it for you but Dennis told me I wasn’t allowed to sing while preaching.) If you don’t know it, it is 755 in Together in Song)

You shall go out with joy
 And be led forth with peace,
 And the mountains and the hills
 shall break forth before you.
 There'll be shouts of joy
 And the trees of the fields
 shall clap, shall clap their hands.

Chorus

And the trees of the fields shall clap their hands,
 And the trees of the fields shall clap their hands,
 And the trees of the fields shall clap their hands,
 And you'll go out with joy.

When John was 6 or 7, he was one of the many children around Australia to contract an endemic form of encephalitis and he was isolated in a ward with several other children. He was in a coma for 18 months (yes you heard correctly) and, of the 80 children who contracted the disease at that time, and in that part of South Australia, he was the only survivor.

There was one event from that time that he recalled and often recounted. He remembered when he awoke that he had heard angels singing but despite his efforts he was unable to join in. Perhaps not calling him to God, but calling him to wake – it was not his time. Maybe it was this experience that was the basis of his unwavering faith.

As a young adult he committed himself to study theology with the intent of becoming a priest. But in his second year of study, he had a nasty accident on his Vesper and broke his ankle. The result of that was that he couldn't continue his studies. A discussion with his mentor, Reverend Chambers, changed his direction. He suggested that John respond to an advertisement for teachers. So he did, trusting that God still had a purpose for him, and was granted an interview which he passed with flying colours. When he was offered the choice of a number of secondary schools, he chose Bentleigh High. He became a much loved, respected and admired teacher at that school, until he retired 34 years later. John would often recount stories, many of them hilariously funny, of his management of students, especially at school camps at which he was in charge of the boys, and the fact that his faith enabled him, with a gentle but firm hand and encouragement to make those camps a time of fun and a positive development experience.

As some of you already know, I have a favourite saying "God will plant you where he wants you!" The other reason John chose or was sent to Bentleigh? He became a member of St John's Anglican Church and at a church picnic, he met Gwen who's grandfather and father were church wardens at St Johns, and with whom he fell in love, wooed, and married - nearly 64 years ago.

Up until the last few years when his deteriorating health prevented him from being out and about much, it was not unusual for an ex student to stop him in the street and greet him with an affectionate "is it really you Mr Wilson? My goodness, you're still alive! In fact, when a group of students were establishing an annual reunion many years ago, one of them did some research, found out John was still alive, tracked him down and invited him to join them which he did, every year, including this year in March.

John's life wasn't a bed of roses. He worked hard. He struggled sometimes and suffered much ill health over the years. But for him, the good outweighed the bad. He adored his wife and they raised three children and involved themselves in their lives, their grandchildren's lives and are blessed with multiple great grandchildren and more on the way. And I don't think John's faith ever faltered, and even in her current grief, neither has Gwen's.

In his homily, St John's current priest, Reverend Santa Packianithan, who visited John frequently, both at home and in hospital, spoke the following words a number of times, describing the way John looked towards the end of his life – it was with no fear and joyful expectation. No fear and joyful expectation.

Why am I telling you about John? For me, his example stamps confirmation on Peter's words. And while quite a lot of suffering over 92 years does not, to me, seem to be a little while, I am confident that, **the God of all grace, who has called him to his eternal glory in Christ, will Himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish him.**

Something to look forward to.

Our Creator chose to give us free will. We can choose not to heed His instructions and warnings. We can choose to be despondent at what we observe or experience and bewail our circumstances. Or we can trust and believe that the trials we face will strengthen us, or teach us, or perhaps give hope to someone else who sees or hears of our experiences and our response to them.

So go out with joy, and be led forth with peace. Trust and believe, with no fear and joyful expectation. To God be the power for ever and ever.

Amen