

Welcoming Strangers

- Sermon Remarks, June 14, 2020
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In the early 1970s, Brother David Judd introduced me to a book by J.B. Phillips. It was entitled, "Your God is too Small." Phillips was part of a group of authors who called themselves "progressive Christians". I must admit that their writings and those of other authors since that time, continue to have a great influence in my life.

I think that recent world tragedies and the current Covid 19 pandemic are bringing a growing awareness of our global interconnectedness and a desire for cooperation and pooling of our resources as we attempt to defeat this world-wide pandemic threat. We are beginning to realize, even if somewhat dimly, that we are joined together globally in a web of interdependence and connectedness and that the future of our world will be determined by global cooperation, rather than the deeply entrenched nationalism which has been the norm for many centuries. As theologian Paul Tillich expressed it, in the aftermath of two horrific world wars and a severe economic depression, "When one person is suffering, we all suffer."

I don't mean to minimize this time of uncertainty and suffering. But let me just give you some food for thought:

- The current estimated global death toll from Covid 19 is around 400,000 people. The hope is that this can be confined to less than 1 million people this year.
- The annual death toll from malnutrition is around 9 million people. A child dies from malnutrition every 10 seconds. In the country of Haiti, where I served for a number of years, the average life expectancy is about 20 years less than here in Australia. As I quote the horrific death figures, I am conscious that they have to be balanced off against another factor – that of overpopulation. We find ourselves in a delicate juggling act trying to balance better health care which results in longer life expectancy, with overpopulation which is further increased by advances in health and medical care. This becomes a moral issue, not only for the world at large, but also for those religions of the world which veto birth control and promote the ideal of large families.

The challenge to the world's religions is profound. In his seminal book, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, Wilfred Cantwell Smith points out that the idea of

religion as something to belong to is a relatively recent phenomenon. All religious systems are humanly created and therefore provisional, not permanent.

The world and the church have changed profoundly since my baptism as a shy teenage stranger in 1960. We have moved from the position of being the "One True Church" to seeing ourselves as part of the "One True Religion." For me, that is not helpful. I see Christ as my model – demonstrating the incarnation of God that is within each one of us. Our God is indeed too small if we limit God's incarnation to one person at one particular point in human history.

Humankind may have been created in God's image, as portrayed in the book of Genesis, but it is clear that we have been creating God in our image ever since. We have endowed God with human attributes and emotions, even gender attributes. In attempting to define God, we have actually confined God. In this emerging age of global identity and cooperation, our God is indeed too small!

In our sacrament of communion, we remember the broken body and spilt blood of Jesus Christ. But the emblems of which we partake also symbolise the broken and divided world in which we live. In 1960 they also symbolised exclusion. In those days we practiced close communion – only those who had been baptised into the One True Church were worthy to partake of the emblems. Today we face the question – who do we either intentionally or unwittingly exclude from our fellowship? Who are the strangers we are called to welcome into our midst? Who are those that we may be afraid of, or ashamed of, that we may judge to be unworthy of God's love? We are called to examine ourselves and to know that God IS love and that God's love is extended to all.

In conclusion, below is the last verse of a hymn I wrote a few years ago. I make no apology for my beliefs. Nor do I insist that you agree with them. But if you find that in some way your faith has been challenged and expanded, then I am happy.

Hymn (tune Finlandia):

So, God of Grace, whatever your name might be:
Allah, Divine, or Blessed Trinity,
Grant us the Grace to see you every day,
And Grace to know you're more than we can say!
Amen!

