

St George's Anglican Church Malvern

Eighth Sunday after Epiphany Yr A 27 February 2011

Isaiah 49.8-16a Psalm 131 1 Corinthians 3.18-4.5 Matthew 6.22-34

What a week it has been! More serious upheaval in the Middle East, the terrible news from Christchurch about the earthquake, and the sudden, unexpected death of our sister in Christ, Wylie Ames.

A few weeks ago I reflected with you on ways that we might understand the recent floods in Australia as yet one more expression of the reality that creation itself is 'broken'. It is as though the fault line in the human heart we call 'sin' is also a fault line in a broken creation. We poor frail humans are defenceless against natural events of such magnitude as we have seen this year.

But today I want to focus on the news of Wylie Ames' suicide, which has so stunned and grieved Wylie's family and friends, and our parish, since we learnt of her death on Tuesday. It occurred, no coincidence I am sure, on the anniversary of Stanford Ames' own suicide. You may recall we remembered him in our prayers for the departed last Sunday. It has been hard to take in, difficult to believe, that our sister in Christ who was with us almost every Sunday at 8am, who joined in the friendly gathering for coffee at Giorgio's most weeks has chosen to die by her own hand.

In reality, death by suicide claims more people than road accidents. You might have read that statistic in yesterday's Weekend Australian magazine. It is important that we talk openly about what our sister and friend has done so that the 'darkness,' the grief and loss and shock and, yes even shame of this moment, can be brought into the light of Christ, the place of healing and hope. And within that light we can embrace Alan and Adrian all Wylie's family as we pray with them and for them and walk with them. They need our compassion and kindness.

Wylie had strong views about a person's right to act as she has. Many of you have heard her express them. It turns out she has belonged to the Voluntary Euthanasia Society since 2004. That helps us to understand her disposition and that she had access to the kind of knowledge that made this possible. When asked by her family if she had spoken to me, Wylie said that did not intend to talk to the Vicar about her plans.

Wylie would have known that in the end I would not want her to take such an important matter as her death into her own hands. There will be a range of views among us, I am sure. I suppose that some may well be thinking, 'Good on Wylie.' Others will be appalled. Perhaps others think I shouldn't be talking about it today. Let's just accept that there are going to be a range of views and reactions amongst and simply for now support one another in our loss. As your Vicar I urge that we support each other to trust God in death, as in life. For me as a baptised person the pattern of living and dying I want to emulate is Jesus' own. Jesus' violent and unjust execution is redemptive for us all because, despite the circumstances, Jesus refused not to trust God. Bystanders taunted him, jeered and cursed him, yet Jesus, feeling abandoned as he did, would not renounce his trust and hope in the God who brings life out of death. Of course, that's the gold standard in faith, but it is the quality of faith God's grace, and the prayers of the faith community can make possible for us.

Wylie did not hide her intentions from her family but nothing they said about things to look forward to, including a new great grandchild coming soon, seemed to make any difference. And for Alan and Adrian and their families the reality of Wylie's actions is another level of grief altogether from the expressed intentions they hoped she might not really mean. But, as they said and as we knew, Wylie was a determined person. She could be difficult sometimes, even hurtful. And she could be full of life, kind and generous.

Wylie left clear instruction that there was to be no funeral, although she wanted her ashes interred in the memorial garden. In our shock and grief we will carry out her wishes, even if we don't understand them. So today we give thanks for all that has been good in her life among us and entrust her to God's care, affirming with Paul that nothing, not even suicide, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Jesus urged his friends not to be afraid. He says that more than anything else. Fear and anxiety is the enemy of faith, not questions or doubts.

I think Jesus was a remarkably happy person. We know he loved a party and enjoyed people for who they were and could become, and he really appreciated the natural world. Take today's gospel portion. We can easily imagine Jesus watching the birds flying round the air currents above Galilee, just enjoying being birds and being alive. We can see him taking time to look at the glorious lilies realising that even the best of human splendour hardly compares. When Jesus tells his followers not be anxious, we can assume he led by example. Jesus wasn't looking anxiously ahead but living in the present moment, which after all, is all we have, and trusting God here and now.

Jesus does not mean that what we eat, or wear isn't important or that we should despise the bodily life we have in a material world. He's talking about what comes first. Seek only worldly things and they become moth eaten in our hands. Trust God, and everything else falls into place, even when it's tough, even when it's scary and even when we are facing our mortality.

Drawing on Isaiah, the early Christians called Jesus a man of sorrows. Jesus is both a man of joy and of sorrow. I believe he was a man of joy because he did not allow the sorrows of this broken world which he entered for our sake to rob him of his confidence in the God who continually creates this world and notices even the sparrow that falls to the earth. And having entered this world, faced its darkness and embraced our dying, Jesus is the one whom we trust now to be walking the way of life with Wylie, and the dead in Christchurch, and all who have died recently, no matter how.

Parents may forget children, even a mother her nursing child but God will not forget or forsake any of God's making, for we are one of us each chiselled onto the palm of God's hand. It's a permanent inscription. And from God's hands there is no release neither we, nor God, need ever consider possible.

Colleen O'Reilly, Vicar.