

High St Uniting Church Frankston

Wide open arms

John 12:20 – 33



Some of you may remember the bumper sticker from the eighties, *I'm not perfect, just forgiven*. A bit cringe worthy, but with good intention. The church, in its many incarnations, in dress standards, in behaviour standards and moral expectations was giving off the distinct impression to the wider world that being a Christian was about being perfect. It was like there was a big wall around the church with a keep out sign rather than open doors and welcome signs. And as a push back, those bumper stickers were part of a

movement trying to say that it's not about perfection, it's about connection to God.

Jesus was Jewish, he preached in synagogues and obeyed the Law where appropriate, he worshipped in the Temple, even said at one point, "I have come for the lost sheep of Israel." Judaism sat like a big wall around Jesus with a keep out sign, even in the early years of the church. So, when John tells us, "Some Greeks came, wanting to see Jesus", this is big, it's like that bumper sticker. "I'm not Jewish, just forgiven."

There is a certain fascination in some parts of the Christian church with the Amish and Mennonite faith communities in Pennsylvania. Communities who express their exclusive identity by calling everyone else 'English'. A hand-me-down of a German/Dutch origin from when they arrived in America when it was an English colony. In a similar way, the Jews of Jesus time called everyone else 'Greek'. Whatever their actual nationality or origin, they lived in Greek cities, dressed in Greek clothes, and spoke and wrote in Greek. So, when we read in John, 'at the festival were some Greeks', the only thing we can say with certainty is that they weren't from Judea or Galilee. These Greeks who pop up like a random comment, and don't even get what they were asking for, point to a world relevance for Jesus. The wall is broken down and the keep out sign is replaced with a welcome sign.

Now, I understand the reference to these visitors coming for the Passover festival and so they are possibly foreign converts to Judaism or "God fearers", but John has also structured this story to be about the world. At Jesus entry into Jerusalem, the Pharisees moan that, "You can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!" And the very next story is some Greeks wishing to see Jesus. Their appearance triggers the long-awaited time for Jesus to fulfil his ministry, what John calls the hour – 'Now is the hour, now is the judgement of the world'.

'The world' is a complex and multi-faceted concept in scripture. Jesus saying 'now is the judgement of the world' can lead to ideas of us versus the world. But, in John, Jesus also tells us that God loved the world. This judgement is about the powers of the world that act against the will of God. Jesus came into the world and shared with, and cared for, all the people he met. John's theology doesn't seem to have taken hold in the Church and any idea of judgement becomes more about the church separating itself from an evil world – like the Amish – and God's love gets morphed into the idea of the church being a lifeboat to save people from the world. And up goes the wall again. Instead of God loves the world, it's us versus the world. One expression of that is the idea that the church is the agent of salvation; you can't come to Jesus except through the church. Another expression of that idea of being

separated is people living in a Christian bubble; Christian radio, Christian schools, Christian TV, Christian books and movies. And John gives us this little story of some Greeks who wish to see Jesus, breaking the wall and popping the bubble.

They come to see Philip, because that's a Greek name, who goes to Andrew, because he also has a Greek name. And there is the break in the wall, the connection point to the world. Instead of telling them that Jesus is for Jewish people only, Philip and Andrew offer a welcome and go and tell Jesus. In our lives we connect with parts of the wider community – the world - how much are we being gatekeepers and how much are we being connection points?

In my life in industry, people come to me for advice, for support; seeking something beyond this world. And I could have shut them down or told them that they had to come to church to get what they were seeking, but instead, I answered their call and offered what advice or counsel that I could. In a small way, I was a connection point to God.

Years ago, in Canterbury, a couple came to see me seeking to be married. They explained that they were part of the Romanian Baptist Church and in their tradition, they had to be baptised to be married. They thought baptism was too important to simply go through to be married and wanted to be married first and consider baptism later. Where was the welcome in that tradition? Could I be a connection point and show the love and care that would lead to them considering baptism?

The message of Jesus had gone far and wide throughout the Roman Mediterranean world. There was no wall around Jesus keeping him exclusive to Judea and Galilee. The ministry of Jesus was a giant welcome sign to the grace of God for the world that God loved. There is no way that we can consider ourselves an exclusive club, or a lifesaving club set apart from the world. We don't know if those Greeks got to see Jesus, but his answer implied that they, and all the world, would see him lifted up on the cross, with arms wide open in welcome. A welcome we can emulate with doors wide open, arms wide open and hearts wide open to meet the world that God loves.