

BUILDING A LIFE OF SACRIFICE

SERMON FOR ST PAUL'S ANGLICAN, BORONIA 11TH NOVEMBER 2007

I think I may have to give this preaching caper away. It's all getting too hard.

Too hard to work out what to say in 20 minutes or so.

Not because I don't know what to say—but because I don't know what to leave out.

Today's topic is "Building A Life Of Sacrifice" and Ken has helpfully given me a copy of Rick Warren's sermon on this topic. Rick makes eight points. Eight points! And that's all based just on one verse of Scripture.

Imagine if he'd been given a chapter to talk on!

There's an enormous amount of material here. A lot to say. Probably a month of Sundays wouldn't be enough.

I feel like a friend who went to work in Israel's Occupied Territories—Palestine if you like.

I was talking to him after he had been there a month and he said that after a month he felt he could write a book about the place.

But after he had been there two years, he said he just didn't know what to say.

I feel like that. I wish I thought less about building a life of sacrifice. I wish there was less material. I wish I *knew* less. I wish I had less experience to draw on.

It would be great to be so ignorant that one could be brief.

But let me try.

First, I do want to share the ideas that Rick Warren has pre-prepared for preachers like me on the topic of "Building A Life of Sacrifice." But I don't want to stop there, because I believe there is something more that needs to be said – something more profound, more important, more essential to our understanding of the Christian faith.

So, as well as sharing Rick Warren's excellent eight points, I also want to share a secret about sacrifice. It shouldn't be a secret, but apparently, for most people it is.

And third, I want to talk about how I think giving is a basic aspect of the human character. That God made us as giving creatures. And that this aspect of our human-ness is there for a reason. Like everything God put in our human nature, he puts there for a reason.

So let's begin with Rick Warren.

Actually, Rick doesn't really talk about Sacrifice. He talks about Giving. Now Giving can involve sacrifice, but we know it does not always.

There's the well-known story in the Bible about the widow's mite. Jesus was watching the rich folk putting lots of money in the offering plate, but then this widow just put in two mites. That's mite m-i-t-e. As a child I always thought it was might m-i-g-h-t. The widow's might. I thought she was some powerful widow. A mighty widow. So the story didn't make a whole lot of sense to me when I was eight. I couldn't understand how you could put your *might* in the offering plate. Let alone two of them.

My Dad, who was an impressive Bible scholar in his own right, tried to explain to me that a mite was half a farthing. Which was no help because even when I was eight, farthings had long since disappeared as coins of the realm.

But I digress.

The point is that the rich were giving, and good on 'em, Jesus said. But only the widow was sacrificing, because two mites was all she had. She gave the lot. There's the difference between giving and sacrificing.

But before I talk about sacrifice, which is my second point, let me stay with giving.

Now, as I mentioned, Rick Warren has eight points to make. And if I were Brian Allen, I would have more hair. And also, I would have a PowerPoint and have issued you all with a list of incomplete sentences and pencils. That would be a good idea, but I get tired enough just writing the sermons without having to create all those effective teaching aids as well, so you'll just have to make your own notes as we go along here.

Point One of Eight: Giving Makes Me More Like God.

If you're going to be like God, you're going to have to learn to give. *God so loved the world that he gave...*

Point Two of Eight: Giving Draws Me Closer to God.

The Bible says money is like a magnet. *Where your treasure is, there is your heart also.* If you put your money into shares, your heart will be in the stock market. And, similarly, if we give our money to God, our heart will be drawn closer to Him.

Point Three of Eight: Giving Breaks the Grip of Materialism.

I don't think that one is too hard to understand. Materialism is about converting money into possessions. If we give our money away instead, materialism can have less grip on us. It's not easy, but there it is.

Point Four of Eight: (You keeping up?) Giving Strengthens my Faith.

If we have faith in God, real faith, we won't hold back in giving. Because we have faith that God will honour our giving. And when he does, and he surely does, we'll know our faith is justified.

Point Five of Eight: Giving Is A Test of My Maturity.

Money is so much part of our lives and society, God uses it as a kind of acid test. Jesus said *"If you can't be trusted with worldly wealth, who is going trust you with the true riches of heaven."* How we

handle our money is one way that God tests our maturity to be able to handle more important stuff.

Point Six of Eight: Giving Is An Investment for Eternity.

Rick says “You can’t take it with you, but you can send it ahead.” The way you send it ahead is by investing in people who are on their way to heaven. He doesn’t mean paying for funerals, he means investing now in Christian work and mission. Investing in the church may not seem attractive to the stock broker, but I can tell you the rewards are heavenly.

Point Seven of Eight: (nearly there) Giving Blesses Me In Return.

And Point Eight of Eight: Giving Makes Me Happy. It feels good to give.

OK. There’s Rick Warren’s eight points. Any one of them worthy of a whole Sunday morning sermon. And I would have been glad (if lazy) to just repeat all these good things. But I feel compelled to say more.

The second thing I want to share appears to be a secret. It took me a while to discover this secret about sacrifice. But I can now share it with you, and many of you will just go “Oh Yeah, I knew that.”

A couple of years after I started working for World Vision I got a passport and started to go see what World Vision was doing in the world.

What I mostly found was people. The most wonderful, amazing people. People who were sacrificing their lives for others. Giving themselves away every day. Going without, in order to keep a hospital going. Living rough to provide a school in a poor village. Abandoning comforts of home in order to deliver medical services in some poor, rural community. Living away from friends and family so that they could engage in the nitty-gritty of a community’s development.

Wonderful amazing people making the most amazing sacrifices. At least I thought they were sacrifices. Because I knew that if I had to do what they were doing, it would be an immense sacrifice.

But you know what I discovered? And here’s the secret. It wasn’t a sacrifice to them.

These people didn’t think they were making any sacrifice at all. The things they had given up, or the hardships they were enduring were just part of their life.

I thought, at first, that it was because their work was so rewarding that they felt *compensated* for their sacrifices. You know, life’s hard, and it’s a pain not having any electricity, and having to dig a new toilet every month, but God is so good in other ways that we soon get over these little sacrifices. I thought they would say that sort of thing. But it wasn’t that at all.

These people just didn’t consider that anything they were doing involved sacrifice.

You see, when you are living and working in the centre of God’s will for your life, it’s ALL good. Nothing feels like a sacrifice. It’s ALL great.

What might seem like a sacrifice to you and me, is something of no importance to a person who is living in the centre of God’s call on their life.

After a while, I realised that this sort of thing was true for me too.

In 1981 I enrolled in Deakin University's first MBA program. Now in those days, people who did MBAs were considered high-flyers. A postgraduate degree in Business Administration could get you a six-figure job just about anywhere. So my fellow students were all working for big accounting firms, or on executive fast tracks to the top of General Motors, or the National Bank, or BHP. And here was I, a middle manager at an overseas aid agency. They were all earning 150,000 a year and I was getting 50.

More than once a fellow student commented on the *sacrifice* I was making to work for a charity. The comment always surprised me, because I thought my salary was perfectly reasonable anyway. I had no sense in my spirit that I was sacrificing anything to work at World Vision.

And later when Judy and I took the family overseas, some friends would say how they couldn't do what we were doing, as if an overseas assignment involved enormous sacrifice. Well, for them, maybe it would have. But for us, it was all good.

Now I am not suggesting that there are not hardships. Of course, things are sometimes tough. Digging a monthly toilet isn't high on the fun scale for anyone. Actually, it's filling in the old one, that's worse.

Of course there are hardships. *But when we walk with the Lord in the light of his word, what a glory he sheds on our way.*

These hardships are just part of the package. They don't feel like sacrifices to you.

So there's the secret, that I am sure most of us already know to be true. What looks like a sacrifice to others, can be just part of the work that we do in the pleasure of answering God's calling on us to participate in his mission in the world. It might be a sacrifice if they had to do it, it isn't a sacrifice for you to do it.

And now to the third thing I want to say. And it actually goes back to Rick Warren's very first point. If you check your notes you will see that his Point One Of Eight was *Giving Makes Me More Like God*.

You see, I begin any thinking about giving with a pre-supposition. We humans are made in the image and likeness of God. And therefore we are made as *giving* creatures.

God so loved the world that he *gave*. Giving is in the very nature of God. And God has placed that very nature in the middle of the human spirit and personality. We are giving creatures.

One of my dear but distant friends is the theologian, Gil Bailie. He lives in California and we communicate spasmodically electronically by email and podcast. I listen to his talks and, sometimes, he listens to mine by way of the Internet. I find his talks learned and deep. I think he finds my talks amusing.

Gil puts this idea of us being giving creatures, better than I can. He says, "Deep in the core of our Being is a very powerful longing to give ourselves away... there is at the core of our Being this tremendous longing to donate ourselves. If that longing is not given an edifying and sanctifying expression, sooner or later it will find a cruder and more destructive expression."

In other words, just like water coming down from the hills will always find its own level, this longing to give ourselves will always find a way to express itself. In good ways or bad.

As sure as night follows day, we are all going to find some thing or some body to give ourselves away to. Because that's the way God made us. Just as it is in God's nature to give himself away for the world, it is in our nature to give ourselves away too. But to what?

Let me give an example:

Let me read a few sentences from the journal of Sylvia Plath. The name Sylvia Plath will not be well known to everyone here. She was an American, a gifted writer, and a troubled soul, who killed herself at the age of 31 in 1963. The reason I want to read this to you is that I think these words summarise the post-modern situation, the 21st century meaninglessness of many lives.

She wrote:

I am afraid

I am not solid, but hollow

I feel behind my eyes a numb paralysed cavern, a pit of hell, a mimicking nothingness

I do not know who I am, where I am going.

I begin to see the compulsion

For admitting original sin

For adoring Hitler

And for taking opium.

In the first part, she describes the Spiritual disease that so many in the world suffer from. The sense of meaninglessness. The lack of substance to life. *I am not solid*. You know, the unbearable lightness of being.

And then, in response to that, she sketches out the three options we seem to have.

Admitting original sin

Adoring Hitler, and

Taking Opium.

Each of these is an example, and a symbol, of the three ways in which we can express this longing within the core of our being to give ourselves away.

We can give ourselves away to admitting to original sin.

We can give ourselves away to adoring Hitler.

We can give ourselves away to Opium.

Or, as Gil Bailie puts with more scholarly words, we can give ourselves away to Christian anthropology, or ideological fanaticism, or escapist self-delusion.

What's he saying? He is saying that sure as eggs we are going to give ourselves away to something. No matter who we are, it is in our very nature to be giving creatures. And these seem

to be the three options people have these days to give expression to their deep desire to give themselves away.

Either to God,

Or to some fanatical obsession,

Or to self-indulgence.

Either we give ourselves to God by following His call into His mission in the world, (admitting original sin);

Or, we give ourselves to fundamentalism, fanaticism, and obsession, (adoring Hitler);

Or, we give ourselves to ourselves, living a life of hedonism, pleasure-seeking, material acquisition, and, maybe, drugs (taking Opium).

Do these three options sound like anyone you know?

We know of saints, even some right here at St Paul's, who demonstrate what it means to give your life away to the God who gave his life for us. There are some obvious ones, like our vicar. But there are many less obvious, but no less meritorious, like those who work for hours in the kitchen giving their lives in service for the mums who attend playgroup.

This is a life of sacrifice, a life of giving, that Rick Warren talks about.

Of course, we know of others (hopefully not too many at St Paul's) who fit into the other categories.

Those who give their lives away to fanaticisms of one sort or another. Obsessive hobbies might seem harmless but not if they are a substitute for what God really wants us to do. And, of course, we all know of fundamentalist fanatics. They are, apparently, everywhere and need to be reported. Every scrap of information will help. I only wish to observe that I find the fundamentalism of the Christian Political Right just as disturbing as the fundamentalism of Osama bin Laden.

And as for taking Opium. Well, our media seems obsessed with Ben Cousins who seems merely to represent a mass movement of drug-takers. So widespread is the appeal to give ourselves to self-indulgence that drug taking is now common-place. It's in the *whatever* category in the Facebook generation.

Well, now I've got you all depressed. Sorry about that. That was an apology, by the way.

We shouldn't be sad at all. Because Option 1 is something we know about. Admitting original sin. Or, in other words, giving ourselves to God.

This is the way God made us. For a purpose. For His purpose. And his purpose is for us not merely to be made in the likeness and image of God, but to discover how to live in the likeness and image of God. A God who so loved the world that he gave...

A God who so loved the world that he gave ... Himself.

When we take part in the Eucharist, when we come to share in the body and blood of Christ, what is the central message?

On the night in which he was betrayed, Jesus took bread ... this is my body which is for you, do this in remembrance of me.

What is the *this* that we are to do in remembrance of Jesus?

Is it the ceremony? Did Jesus just want us to do this weekly role play with wafers and port wine? Or grape juice if you're a Baptist? Do we seriously think that someone like Jesus, who was so condemning of empty religious practice, would want us to just mindlessly go through the bread and wine motions every week?

What is the *this* that we are to do in remembrance of Him?

What is that Jesus does with the bread? What is it that Jesus does with the wine?

He gives it away. He gives it away.

Jesus is saying this is my body—given for you. Go and give it away.

Jesus is saying this is my blood—given for you. Go and give your lives away too.

Do *this* in remembrance of me.

You're going to give yourself to something. Don't make a bad choice.

A-men.