Sermon St Paul’s 10-3-2019
International Women's Day and First Sunday in Lent

Archbishop Kay has sent a message for International Women’s Day, which you can find as in insert with your liturgy sheet. This year’s theme is ‘Better the Balance, Better the World’. In this pamphlet, the Archbishop writes that it is ‘our Christian conviction that anything which denies, diminishes or distorts the full humanity of women runs contrary to the equal dignity which belongs to all who have been made in God’s image.’

Today I would like to look deeper into to this seemingly clear statement of faith: we have all been made, women and men, all genders for that matter, since nowadays gender is more fluid than the traditional man-woman binary, in God’s image.

There is a person, a human being, and there is God. These two are related in a very intimate relationship, to which I’ll come back to soon. And there is an image. Not just an image but God’s image. Where do we find this image? The bible makes sure we understand that God is always hidden. We can’t face God directly. So how do we know what this image is from which we have been made?

My answer is that we are in relationship with this image in the delicate, vulnerable and gentle domain of the soul. The soul is the sacred place and space in which we meet God, and are being transformed into God’s image – were we become Divine.

Now, what has this got to do with International Women’s Day?

This day is to celebrate the social, economic, cultural and political achievements of women. And, of course, I am all for **equality**: equal payment, women allowed to play golf on weekends (I couldn’t believe my ears hearing that this still needs to be addressed), equal chances in education and careers. I am all for **safety**: no woman or

girl should be abused and used nor looked down on. It is a crying shame that it still needs to be pointed out! Hasn’t anyone been listening in the past 100 years or more?

This is a Sermon, aiming to connect our Christian tradition to our current lives. The Christian season we are in is Lent, which started last Wednesday, Ash Wednesday. Stuart explained last week that in Lent the liturgy is more austere to create a sacred space, a sense of awe. In this sacred space, we witness God-at-work in the transfiguration of Christ and His resurrection. The more we are stripped back to the bone, the more clear we look into the mirror and see the reflection of God’s image in the life, death and resurrection of Christ. But how can we see God’s image in ourselves?

Again, the place and space where God dwells in us is the soul. Let me take you on a short journey of the soul. The history of the word is very diverse but all represent basic realities of existence. Common feature of these realities is that they are regarded as essentially different from the materials of which we, nature, and our world are composed.

In the languages of the three monotheistic religions the soul is called: in Hebrew - rûah, nepes; in Arabic - rûh, nafs; in Greek – daimon, pneuma, thymos, idea, psyche, nous, logos. I could talk for days on the subject but for now it is enough to conclude that even in all diversity there is no doubt at all that the full biblical tradition, even in early, medieval, and reformation views the soul as the point of contact between God and us. An utmost intimate meeting with God in our deepest inner being. We are on the journey of the soul, a lifelong transformation. No transformation without desert, no transfiguration without death on the crosses that life presents us to.

Now back to International Women’s Day. When we talk about equality, and rally for balance, fight for justice: whose mirror are we looking in? I am aware that I’m using some big words here, but I need it to make my point. The mirrors in which we women, are looking in and the faces in the mirrors that gaze back at us, are called: patriarchy (everything is viewed along the standards set by men), capitalism (money and market first), liberalism (survival of the fittest), materialism, empiricism etc. These are the standards and values that are dominant in our Western societies. As a footnote, realise they have all devalued, denigrated and distanced itself from the soul.

We, every one of us, have more or less internalized all of these Grand Narratives. These mirrors are the only ones most of us are aware of. The problem is that if we mirror ourselves in these dominant discourses we only *re*-act to a reality that is set before us. But is this the only reality possible? Imagine what our image of reality would be if we would strip bare to the bone in the desert and discover more images, Divine Images – which mirrors hope, freedom, blossoming, love, and peace! What would that mean for the ‘balance we want to better’?

True balance, a lasting balance, even beyond our physical death comes from putting the soul first. The rest comes from that. In today’s readings we hear the radicalism that comes with surrendering yourself, with your whole body, heart, mind and soul to God. The four texts happen to be the sum of the First and Second Testament’s spirituality.

Psalm 91 poetically talks about our intimate relationship with God, in whom we dwell, in whose shelter we are finding refuge. You’ll be looked after. Trust it, surrender to it and God is near, as close to us as our soul.

Deuteronomy tells us about the sacredness of the land we live on and the soil that produces fruits. It pleads for an attitude of gratitude, respect and to bow before God. This text also bridges a core theme of the Judeo-Christian tradition: justice. God leads his people out of oppression.

A message repeated by Paul in Romans 10: Christ is the culmination of the Law (remember, the five books of the First Testament, the Torah) so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes. It’s about equality. This text also refers a number of times to the relationship between heart and mouth. Heart is soul, mouth is breath, speech is action. I will come back to this shortly but for now I would like you to bear in mind last week’s sentence ‘And the Word (*logos*, soul) became flesh and lived amongst us.’

Finally, in Romans 10 we hear about Jesus’ journey in the wilderness. Jesus withdraws from his day’s civilisation into the ‘wilderness’. In the first sentence the author says ‘he went full of the Holy Spirit’. After the discernment of all the powers pulling at him he returns, as the last sentence describes ‘in the power of the spirit’. Christ needs the time in the wilderness to discern God’s movements in his soul. Christ makes a radical choice to be led by the spirit – and nothing else. God breathes us into life, in the intimate sacred space and place of the soul. The rest follows from that. It takes courage to surrender to this radical faith.

In our recent Judeo-Christian traditions, we have female mirrors who testify of this radical surrendering: Simone Weil, Etty Hillesum, Dorothe Sölle, Edith Stein, Therese of Lisieux, Mother Teresa. Without any doubt there are Australian women whom I still need to discover who have similar life stories to tell.
These women all embarked on a journey of the soul, or were put on it. Our journey inwards is where we start. This is a journey to the heart. If, and when, we embark on this journey of the soul we are choosing a path that is strongly countercultural. We, as Christians, have to look into our souls to develop a radical point of view. Anarchic radicalism is, in my opinion, the only road left for the Christian Churches at the moment anyway. The radical message of God with and within us, always. God is as close to us as our soul.

Following Christ, we are called to be anarchic. This is the starting point, not only re-acting to the social, political, cultural discourses we are all embedded in.

Back to the so-called prologue of John: ‘The word became flesh’.
I want to invite you to exercise a radical and anarchic turn in this sentence. What would happen if we would say that it is not only God’s word that became flesh in Christ, but also that the female flesh needs to become Word?

In summary, I am advocating that we in the tradition of Lent strip ourselves bare to the bone and away from the material to the abundant richness and wealth of our inner lives and the immateriality of the soul. To radically surrender to the Judeo-Christian Law that living a good life, a life driven by values, is radically not about power nor possession.

To embark on the journey of the soul is about commitment to our inner-journey; it’s about immersion in depth; it’s about allowing us to be initiated into another way of seeing, another way of being, another way of behaving. It is about Becoming Divine.

What if we, the women here today, in this church, would allow ourselves to go on this journey - in freedom, and in the loving face of our Mother God? To connect heart and mouth, our female flesh becoming Word. What would our radical answer, springing from the soul, be to the challenge of a ‘better balance’? I invite all of us to put this on the future agenda of International Women’s Day.

When we put the soul first, that space where God and I meet, not only will we realize we don’t need much at all, but also that the rest will come from that. Radical surrender, bowing before the feminine sacred, born deep within us. The flesh made Word by the power of the soul.

**Meditation.**

In conclusion I propose a meditation.Look deep within. In being able to notice the movements in our soul we need to be in touch with it first. What helps us to be aware of our inner depths? Secondly, what is ultimately sacred to you? What is worth radically fighting, and dying for?