

14th Sunday after Pentecost (Luke 13:10-17)

21/8/16

“The Millennials, Jesus and the Gospel today ...”

I speak in the name of Jesus the Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.

Do we really understand the younger generation of today?

I recently came across a powerful article written by Robert Guest and published in “The Economist” (January 2016).

The article was aptly titled, Generation Uphill. At first, I wondered why the author would use such a title, having taught many children of this generation myself. Once I started reading the article, I began to understand more fully the challenges that the younger generation of today face.

If we claim to be a Christian Church rooted in the real world expressing the love of Christ in a constructive and pragmatic manner, then we need, by default, to understand the context within we work. As leaders and as the older generation, it is our responsibility and duty to comprehend the challenges that our children face.

You may ask why?

It’s quite simple.

We cannot share the Gospel of Jesus if we don’t understand the person we are sharing it with.

So then, who are the Millennials?

The Millennials have been described as the generation of children who became adults around the turn of the century. They are also known as Generation Y or the Net Generation.

They have also been described as the brainiest and best educated generation ever! This group of people grew up in the age of the Smartphone, as well we the global disaster in 2008.

In some ways, it can be argued, that the younger generation have never had it so good. They have immediate access to global knowledge via the World Wide Web. They enjoy freedom of expression that their elders could never have imagined, both sexually and otherwise. Their average IQ scores are the highest ever recorded thanks to mass education and improved nutrition.

But, they also have intense challenges:

Firstly, this generation struggles with massive unemployment statistics. It is difficult for them to find a job and establish a career. I am also reminded of the acronym NEETS: Not in education/employment or training. This is because of the immense cost of tertiary education today. Many families struggle to fund university or college training, with the result that either students land up with massive student loans or don't have a tertiary education at all. In addition, some students find themselves qualified for a vocation, owing on a student loan and unable to find employment. This is very demoralising for all concerned.

Secondly, many Millennials find themselves still living with their parents or extended family. This is because they are essentially "locked out" of the property market due to increasing housing values and salaries that have not kept pace with inflation. This creates a dilemma where often the older generation is now supporting the younger generation for longer periods of time, placing financial strain on the retirement plans of the older generation. Having said that, it has also been stated by financial professionals that many corporate and national pension plans have borrowed heavily from lending institutions in order to stay afloat and liquid. This means that the bill will eventually be handed over to the younger generation to pay back. The bottom line is that the world today is finding itself in a precarious financial model that is unsustainable.

Thirdly, Millennials are marrying later, if at all, and having fewer children. Dating apps have changed the way people meet and engage in relationships. There is a focus on having fewer children in order to meet the cost of a quality education. The global fertility rate has halved since 1960, from five babies per woman to 2.5. Some parents are deciding that it is no longer necessary to be in a marriage or even a civil union in order to have children. The proportion of

children born outside marriage OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries tripled between 1980 and 2007, from 11% to 33%. Similarly, divorce rates doubled between 1970 and 2009.

Fourthly, in spite of ongoing wars and conflicts in various areas around the world, as the world ages, it is becoming more peaceful. But, it needs to be said, that many militaristic cultures in some countries use the high unemployment figures to lure young men into political ideologies that often promote violence and mayhem.

Fifthly, the Millennials have a different idea about work/life balance. They often spend up to six hours online a day. They flit from job to job, not because they are fussy, but because job security is a thing of the past. They demand flexible working hours and work-life balance because they know that they don't have to be in the office to be productive. Their creative minds have designed life-changing ventures from Facebook to Uber.

Lastly, what will it be like when the Millennials rule the world? It has been proposed that the world will be more tolerant, politically and about sexual choices. There will be less racism. There will be more hesitancy to use military force. They will remain healthier than us and live longer than us. They are the future.

Many of you may be thinking, "Why the focus on this topic this morning? What does this have to do with the church and Jesus?"

I would argue, most humbly, that this topic has everything to do with the church and Jesus.

If the future of the Christian Church in modern society is to be guaranteed, then Christian leaders and laity need to understand the generation that we hope to hand the church over to. The Millennials think differently, have a different value system, query more and are independent thinkers.

We read in today's Gospel how Jesus was criticised for healing a sick woman on the Sabbath. The culture that Jesus grew up in and ministered in had strict protocol rules that had to be adhered at all times. Yet, Jesus, being high EQ and wise beyond His years, was able to think outside of the box and challenge the status quo. He chose to step outside of the cultural values of the day and act

on His beliefs. You see, Jesus had the conviction and faith that what He was doing was the right thing at the right time. He challenged the status quo in order that God might be glorified. This took strength of character and faith. Jesus was able to see the bigger picture and the result was that God was glorified and established in a deeper way.

Our challenge is similar.

Jesus operated as a person of history within a particular social context.

The challenges you and I face today in the 21st Century Jesus could only have dreamed about. Yet, He did leave us some vital leadership examples in the Gospels about how to handle the modern world and more importantly, the Millennials.

Firstly, Jesus calls us to be tolerant as Christians. Times are a changing. They have changed already. We need to keep up. Are we presenting and living a Gospel that the Millennials can relate to? Are we embracing the different cultures and ideologies around us in a loving manner that symbolises Christ?

Secondly, Jesus took action, even when the action invoked criticism and complaint. He was prepared to go against the norm for the glory of God. Are we? If we are prepared to keep the Gospel and the Church relevant in modern society, are we prepared to take action and allow change to the way we do things in order to stay relevant to a changing world and generation? This is hard. Ask me. If I had a choice, I would still be chanting every mass in Latin and wearing my biretta. But, as my Professor of New Testament studies once said to me, this is looking back into the historical church. We need to be moving with the times and doing our best to stay relevant and real to the new generation. This may mean that we start to do things like liturgy differently. This is very challenging for the older generation who often remain very focused on holding onto the past.

Thirdly, Jesus seldom judged. The Christian Church has, unfortunately, become very good at judging others, often to the detriment of the inclusive message of love in the Gospel. For many of the Millennial Generation, the Christian Church has promulgated exclusivity. Many of the younger generation feel judged and unable to live up the living standards of the Church. Is this really the message

of Jesus? Would Jesus really have refused to baptise the baby of an unwed mother? Would Jesus really have refused to minister to those of alternative human sexuality? This is a challenge for us as the older generation who often thrive on traditional church law and canons. I am not for a moment suggesting a free-for-all where there are no morals or values. What I am suggesting is that sometimes I think the Church is so caught up in controlling and passing judgement, that we fail the Gospel and Jesus by forgetting that the love of God is for everyone, without exception and without judgement.

Lastly, we are called as Christians to think outside of the box. Sadly, in many mainline Christian denominations, membership continues to be in a negative growth rate. We are to blame for this.

As a church, we need to ask ourselves some very serious questions:

Have we remained real?

Have we remained relevant?

Have we always brought the love of God to the world in an inclusive and non-judgmental way?

Are we open to change and new styles of worship and liturgy?

Do we preach tolerance?

Do we practice tolerance?

Are we Jesus in the world or merely protecting an aging institution that just might not survive into the next century unless we remain real and relevant?

The future of the Christian Church ultimately lies in the hands of the Millennials. It is our challenge as the older generation to nurture them in such a way that the love of Jesus is passed down in such a way that the Millennials will want to continue sharing the love of Jesus.

This is our challenge.

We need to be brave.

We need to be open to the Holy Spirit.

We need to be listening very carefully to what this generation is trying to tell us.

Are you and I really listening?

May God bless you in this week ahead as you re-evaluate your engagement with the Millennials in your life.

Amen.