

## **Sermon “Living the Red Words Out Loud”**

**Kirk of St James**

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I am not sure about you, but with the current state of the world I try to cultivate as much positivity through my social media interactions as possible. One person I enjoy following is Jen Hamilton, who is a labour and delivery nurse based out of the United States. She is a strong advocate for women, and both her and her extended family strive to live their faith in meaningful ways. For example, Jen created an organization called “Hot Mess Express” a non-profit that rescues moms in need. It’s a group of moms who go into the homes of other moms who are struggling. They do dishes, laundry, organizing, whatever they need to have fresh start. With over 120 chapters across the country, her message of hope and compassion is contagious.” Recently Jen found herself at the centre of death threats, and people trying to take away her nursing license. What did she do that was so egregious? She read a passage from Revelation, and a passage from the gospels. The gospel passage specifically was about the great commandment “love the lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind, and your neighbour as yourself.” The blow back was immediate.

While working through how to handle this she decided to create a merchandise line. One of the accusations levelled against her was that she was “toxically empathetic”, so she made it into a shirt. She also created another one that said, “Read the red words” which refers to Bibles that print the words of Jesus in red—what is written there is important! She said whatever money she made would be donated to charity, and within days of launching she had over \$30 000 to give away. The whole experience had me once again considering how the message of Bishop Budde was received when she preached for mercy during the inauguration activities and she also received death threats. I cannot comprehend how people can claim to be “Christian” on one hand, and at the same time take such offense to what we are literally told is the most important thing in the Bible as to send death threats to someone. My brain literally cannot compute this in any way, shape or form. It begs the question what does our faith mean? And also what exactly does church mean to us? What is the point of it?

Going back to our passage in Kings today, takes us to the heart of what Church is. Some of the key words are widow, orphan, and stranger. These groups of people are often listed in

the New Testament (and Old) as being the social classes with absolutely no voice in the world around them. While the world did not have any use for these groups, God certainly did, caring about them down to the last woman, and child. As we know and read in the Bible, it is under God's guidance that a series of laws were put into place to give the most vulnerable in society a voice and protection. In Elijah's day widows, orphans and strangers were the poorest of the poor, not worth the time or money to bother with. They were not under the protection of any adult, male citizen, therefore life was miserable. When Elijah comes to the widows house during a time of famine, she has been fighting tooth and nail for the survival of both her and her son.

Maybe we know how that struggle feels. Maybe we know in our hearts what it is to fight back against hopelessness and fear. The widow had not fully given up, though the reality of her supplies did not escape her. On the promise of a miracle she prepares a meal that could have possibly been their last but, instead becomes their salvation. The jars will never run empty in return for the kindness she had shown a stranger. Therein lies one of the holy human mysteries that face us in our lives. We are both the widow and Elijah. One of the most famous definitions of evangelism is we are simply "one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread." In this definition we know ourselves to be poor, yet somehow out of God's love and abundance we are able to give back. As one writer said "In God's name, we like the widow bring water, oil, bread and wine for the lost, oppressed, poor, and forgotten. Surprised by joy, we receive life from their hand, for God promises that when we receive the stranger and the poor, we may be receiving angels without knowing it." The well of God's love for humankind is bottomless.

While I was in seminary I was never convinced that learning Greek was worth the heartache and sleepless nights, but there is one definition I learned that changed how I view the church and who we are. The word church in Greek is *ecclesia*, and it means the gathered people, the congregation. The Church is literally its people, and we are at our best when we become the voice of the voiceless, the protection for those who are vulnerable, and seek justice wherever there is injustice. While people often lament that the Church is not relevant in today's world, the reality is we are as vitally important as ever, because there is work that God still calls us to do. He calls us to share the good news, and to continue to care for the widow, the orphan and the stranger. I recently had a conversation with a friend about why I think Church is so

important. My final answer to him was that it provided me with the opportunity to be part of something bigger than myself; it allowed me to be part of a community that comes together and cares for one another and then looks at the world and asks, ‘What can we do to make it better?’ And so for the rest of our time together this morning, I’d like to tease out that role of church a bit more.

In first-year university Religious Studies classes, one of the first things often done is trying to define religion. As it turns out, that is almost impossible to do. It’s hard to try and define because there are so many components to a religious system. Often, at the end of the day, you’re left with two kinds of ways to define and categorize a religion: substantive and functional. I won’t get into great detail here, but essentially the substantive often refers to what a religion believes. So this category is concerned with beliefs relating to doctrine, theology, creeds, and scripture. But the functional definitions are concerned with what a religion does: its rituals, its liturgy, its evangelism. In a word: its action.

These two categories of definitions – substantive and functional can also be applied to church. And I think both are important: our theology is necessary. Our creeds are valuable. But if churches only define themselves by what they believe, then we miss out on perhaps the most important part of the church. We miss out on seeing the real work the church does.

This distinction between ‘substantive and functional’ isn’t just academic nonsense. If we look at the book of James he writes: “Be doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving yourself.” James is saying effectively: those substantive definitions are fine – the church can believe all the creeds they want, but more than that, the church needs to live them out!” He continues on to say that religion – or a church - that does not take action is worthless. He urges churches of his time to care for the widows and orphans. To extend into their communities. He pushes us to consider and continue in the functional aspects of a church that we as a community of faith engage in.

I am afraid I have some bad news for people who think that calling for mercy, kindness, love of ones neighbour, or even worse--putting that love into action goes against the teachings of Jesus.

Picture the widow of Zarephath—hands weathered, back bent, gathering sticks for what she believes will be her last meal. The famine has drained the land dry, and survival has turned into surrender. She is preparing for an ending. How often do we find ourselves in the same

position? Not in physical starvation, but in spiritual emptiness, financial strain, emotional exhaustion—believing that what we have is not enough. Yet, even in the quiet act of collecting sticks, God is watching. And He is preparing provision before we even realize it.

The widow has resigned herself to the reality of scarcity. She sees her flour dwindling, her oil thinning. She is making peace with loss. Many of us operate the same way—we measure what’s left, count our resources, and convince ourselves it will never be enough. We prepare to settle into limitation rather than step into expectation. But even as she moves toward an inevitable ending, God moves toward a new beginning. The famine does not mean God has stopped working. It means He is about to show up in an unexpected way.

Elijah appears and makes a request that defies reason—"Bring me water, and a piece of bread." The widow must choose between the reality of her scarcity and the audacity of faith. She does not know how the flour will last. She does not know if the oil will stretch beyond a single meal. But she obeys. This is where faith becomes real—not when we have plenty, but when we choose obedience in uncertainty. Faith is not about knowing the outcome. It is about trusting that God will work within it.

The widow does what seems impossible—she gives when there is nothing left to give. And because of her faith, she does not starve. The flour never runs out. The oil never runs dry. Provision does not come as abundance, but as enough for each day. God does not need abundance to perform a miracle. He simply needs trust. Whatever you have—whether it feels like a handful of flour or a fading supply of oil—God can sustain it. Trust in His provision, even when all you are doing is gathering sticks, believing that the famine is the final word. Because in God's hands, it never is. This type of faith is who we are as believers and as a church. Dogged hope even in the face of despair, and acting even when others believe it is impossible.

So the next time someone asks you “Why do you like going to church?” it is my prayer that you will remind them that church isn’t just about gathering once a week to worship God in a series of strict rituals. It’s so much more than that. It’s a celebration of life. It’s an offering. It’s a form of joy. It’s coming together to spread that joy into the world. It is trusting when it feels like there is nothing left, and opening our hearts to the possibilities that God lays before us. Let us live the “red words” out loud together as a community.