

# Sermon Notes

**St Mark's Anglican Church  
South Hurstville**

**Pentecost 20  
14 October 2007**

**Preacher  
The Reverend Chris Albany  
Rector**

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Readings: Jeremiah 29. 1, 4-7; Psalm 66.1-8; 2 Timothy 2. 8-15; Luke 17. 11-19

## In their welfare is our welfare

The secret of a good sermon is to have a good beginning and a good ending; and to have the two as close together as possible – so said George Burns. Si perhaps I'll sit down now!

Kevin Andrews and Sudanese refugees have been in the news over the past few days with the announcement of the moratorium on immigrants from North Africa and Sudan in particular. On this issue there has been an intervention by the Jewish community by way of a press release.

### **“Executive Council of Australian Jewry speaks out on refugee policy**

Grahame Leonard, President of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry, the peak body of Australia's Jewish community, said today:

Since the official end of the White Australia policy, Australia has prided itself on the non-discriminatory nature of both its immigration and refugee policies. The principle of non-discrimination on the basis of race has enjoyed bipartisan support within Australia for more than a generation and is strongly supported by the Australian Jewish community.

Our community would oppose any attempt by either side of politics to abandon or water down this principle. An application by a person to settle in Australia, whether as a refugee or as an immigrant, should be determined on its individual merits and not by reference to that person's race or country of origin. Further, as Australians we are accustomed to caring for those who, through no fault of their own, are destitute and homeless.

This is not only a matter of moral principle and legal obligation. Deciding applications for entry to Australia solely on the merits is in Australia's long term interests.”

A helpful comment, which connects with what I am wanting to say this morning.

The Bible really is a radical set of writings – full of surprise and ideas and attitudes and behaviours, which are counter-cultural to the norms of the day. One at times is inclined to thinking that the only way to be “orthodox” is to take the non-traditional or alternative approach- in other words, to be heretical – or at least run the risk of being thought of that way!

Now if that all sounds a bit Irish – it probably is. But let me explain in the light of today's Old Testament and Gospel readings.

Today's few verses from Jeremiah are part of a larger section, which involves confrontation between Jeremiah and two other would-be prophets Hananiah and Shemaiah. The majority of Israel including the King Jehorab have been taken into captivity in Babylon. Jeremiah in chapter 27 in the symbolic action of putting a yoke on his shoulders has declared that the conquest by Babylon is not just a momentary problem but also a far more permanent situation. His actions are in conflict with the orthodox and majority opinion which stressed how God would quickly reverse the situation – because at the heart of Judean faith was the belief that God dwells in His temple in Jerusalem and that the divine presence was permanent and so Jerusalem and Israel were secure from invasion and overthrow and captivity. Hananiah gives voice to this orthodoxy in chapter 28 by breaking Jeremiah's yoke and declaring God will quickly do the same to Babylon. Jeremiah then warns the people not to trust the lie that Hananiah is perpetuating and continues the conflict with the letter to the exiles we have read this morning.

Jeremiah advises them to settle in for the long haul. Shemaiah another prophet wrote just the opposite to the exiles, namely that they should prepare to return.

What is easy for us to overlook is the fact that Jeremiah's words were heresy in 597 BCE. We have lost touch with how shocking to the Israelites' Jeremiah's suggestion that should seek the welfare of the Babylonians. It is of the same order as suggesting we should seek the welfare of the Taliban. It is his two opponents who reflect the orthodoxy of his day. Psalm 48, for example, supports Shemaiah and Hananiah not Jeremiah and they have taken a more difficult position in some ways. Jerusalem has been defeated. To proclaim the power of God in the face of such contradictory evidence appears to be the stronger act of faith and it is supported by the tradition. Yet they are wrong. In the year 597 a simple reaffirmation of tradition is a lie and is a denial of true prophecy – so this whole section of Jeremiah 27-29 contains a strong message about God and change.

So too in the Gospel we have Jesus on the edge or borders of his society. In the region between Samaria and Galilee Jesus meets ten lepers (outcasts) who were forced to live on the edge or boundaries of society. Elsewhere each of three first Gospel writers recall Jesus reaching out and touching a leper to heal. He cuts across the norms and mores of the society and touches and embraces the untouchables, including even Samaritans in the ambit of His compassionate outreach. As I have suggested in Connections today we would do well to ponder where the boundaries of our society are today; – who is on the edge and where are we in relation to them and to Jesus? What for example should our response be, individually and collectively as a nation to Sudanese refugees? The Jewish community seem to be closer to the mark than Kevin Andrews and the Government do they not?

All this it seems to me means that we have to constantly be open to the possibilities that we are being challenged to think and act outside the square – that maybe seeming heresy in thought and action is closer to the heart and mind of God than people usually think.

With that in mind I want to come back to reflect on the last part of the Old Testament reading – that point where Jeremiah as God's prophet says, "But seek the welfare of the city, where I have sent you, for in its welfare you will find your welfare." I link that on my thinking with the strands of thought in our Scriptures, which highlight the importance of hospitality and receiving and welcoming the stranger and alien and sojourner. The refugee and asylum seeker (amongst others in our modern context) for in their welfare we find our welfare too.

So whether it is us in a strange land or us welcoming strangers the principle of hospitality, of mutuality, of working together is held up. It seems to me that this fits in with Jesus' new command to love even one's enemies and his way of non-violence. I wonder what all this might mean in the context of our and the world's response to terrorism. Certainly we need to pray not only for the US and its allies but for the Taliban and Afghan and Iraqi people as well. But more than pray – what might it mean to seek their welfare?

The traditional response – the orthodoxy if you like – in respect to terrorism is to say we must use force in return. All such violence leads to is a perpetuation of the conflicts and enmities of that have beset human history.

Its not easy – one can't just sit back and do nothing. But one wonders whether there is not some other more powerful way to bring terrorists to account. A way which is counter culture – which goes against the tried and true ways which have been found wanting.

The one thing I am sure about is that we as a human family need to find ways of overcoming the differences of division which separate us. We need to pray for all people but especially those that we feel most distant/alienated from. For in their welfare we will find our welfare too! That's the mystery and paradox and challenge we need to enter into.