

Sermon Notes

St Mark's Anglican Church

South Hurstville

Preacher

The Reverend Clive H Norton

Visiting priest

Pentecost 11

7 October 2007

Readings: Lamentations 1.1-6; Psalm 37.1-9; 2 Timothy 1.1-14; Luke 17.5-10

GOD dwells wherever we let God in...

Ten days ago I read the following in an important new book, “An Aboriginal leader in Australia, who in his youth had been thoroughly trained in European thought patterns, tells the story against himself that he was once addressing an Aboriginal community and that one of the elders sat on the ground beside him. After a while the elder became agitated and started constantly interrupting him with the advice, ‘Talk in pictures, talk in pictures’. This is the way of the Aboriginal people and of many other peoples, and it was the way of Jesus. Much Christian preaching on Sundays would vastly improve if preachers paid heed to this advice rather than spoke in abstract ideas.” Those are the words of an Australian Catholic bishop, Geoffrey Robinson, in his powerful incisive book with the subtitle *Reclaiming the Spirit of Jesus* and the Aboriginal leader who told the story against himself is Patrick Dobson.

I continue the quote from Bishop Geoffrey Robinson as he illustrates a vital point from the stories of the Hebrew people being led by Moses towards a new future. “Scholars of the bible believe that the people who fled from Egypt were utterly convinced that they had experienced a genuine action and the presence of their god in their escape and in their coming into the land of Israel. Most scholars now believe that they then told the story of this escape, not literally, but in vivid, imaginative, powerful and highly effective stories. What we find in the bible, therefore, is neither a literal account of exactly what happened nor pure fantasy, for the authors told of a real and divinely-assisted escape from slavery, but they did so by ‘talking in pictures’ⁱ. The evidence we can gain from all sources supports this view and is so strong that it can no longer be sustained that Christians must believe that each one of these stories tell the literal truth of what happened. The ancient Hebrews, like many other peoples, told their factual history through pictorial stories, and many Christian problems began only when people began to reverse this process and take the stories as factual history.”

Today in this parish we celebrate the gift of life in twin boys Nicholas and Christopher. For 2000 years sincere followers of Jesus have come together to thank God for the gift of children and to pray that their children should also grow up to become followers of Jesus. About Baptism millions of words have been written. Theories, doctrines, rituals, customs and liturgies (forms of worship) have developed, which I think leave most people bewildered. Perhaps again we get nearer to the truth if we stop asking what actually happens, and see Baptism more as an acted “story”.

It was 19 years ago that I was led to discover a story which for me ever since gives the clearest insight into what Baptism Services and all other religious rituals and liturgies are really about. I used it in a sermon at the Baptism of our first grandchild.ⁱⁱ

If you have been in a village in the Middle East or if you saw the fascinating musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, you will be able more easily to picture the scene.

Once upon a time, there was a Jewish Rabbi. He used to gather every morning with his villagers. They would share their joys and sorrows, their dreams and disappointments, their ups and downs. And this one morning the Rabbi looked at the villagers and asked them a question, “Where does God dwell?” [Or as people today might ask, Where is God?] And the villagers thought for a moment, and thought for a moment; and then a twinkle appeared in some of the villagers’ eyes, and there were smiles and giggles and laughter. Finally one

of the villagers said, “*Rabbi, what a silly question to ask! Is not all the world filled with the splendour of God?*”

It was then that the Rabbi looked at these villagers with love, and answered his own question and said, “***God dwells wherever we let God in***”.

That story invites us to think again. What happens to us depends critically on who and what we choose to let into our lives.

The people to whom Jesus spoke, like people today, had all sorts of different images of ‘God’ and what it means to be ‘spiritual’. As we read again the Gospels according to Mark, Matthew, Luke and John, and especially Jesus’ parables, and about the ‘Kingdom of God’ which was the core of his teaching, we begin to get a clearer picture of his understanding of God.

For now I choose four facets of his teaching, each is only a sketch outline what needs to be fleshed out in discussion:

First, Jesus denied the notion that God is the cause of sickness or evil things. The God of Jesus is pure compassion, mercy, justice and love. The sort of love that suffers alongside others and always seeks the best outcome even when people bring catastrophe and suffering upon themselves. Jesus challenged the old concepts of a vengeful or petty God who required sacrifices or a persuader to keep “Him” on side or to give us the crops we need!

Second, Jesus used picture words to talk about what is wrong in the world. He used the culturally familiar images, e.g. Satan, the Devil, evil spirits, demons. But by healing the sick and how he answered question, he denied the separate existence of any power of evil. For Jesus the issue is that we are enmeshed with all other people who have lived before us and are living now. We fail to see that many or most of our problems arise from our own or other peoples’ self-centeredness, self-deceptions, addictions, obsessions, greed, lust for power, anger, desire for revenge and the like. These are ‘spiritual’ problems that can only be solved by finding and living the way of God’s ‘kingdom’.

Third, Jesus taught that we are free to respond to God or not. God gives us that freedom, and will not manipulate, threaten or frighten to get our response.

Fourth, Jesus taught that we should actively do good under all circumstances. Those who are under the influence of ‘the Kingdom of God’ – those who are intoxicated by the presence of God within them – will meet indifference, hostility or harm to themselves with kindness, forgiveness and positive action to change what is unjust and wrong. Jesus reinforced and expanded old teachings like that in Psalm 37: “Let go anger, let not envy move you to do evil”. Jesus said, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:43) Paul similarly said, “If your enemies are hungry, feed them...” (Romans 12:20). But such goodness, provokes opposition. Inevitably groups and individuals who organize their lives around greed, their own comfort or the pursuit of power, cannot tolerate such teaching. They crucified Jesus for it.

What grabbed the attention of the group that Jesus gathered around him was that he ‘walked the talk’. In today’s reading from Luke 17:5-10, they were obviously amazed and wanted in their lives what he had. They begged him, “Increase our faith!” He does not do anything. He does not get them to kneel down and then put his hand on their heads to bless them or something ‘religious’, as we might expect. No he speaks ‘in pictures’ for them to draw their own conclusions and find the strength to carry on. The first picture is of FAITH being like a mustard seed, miniscule in size, but able to uproot a mulberry tree. Its meaning is, Use what you have got and see the impossible! The second picture is of the slave slogging all day working on the farm and then having to prepare and serve a meal for the owner before he can himself have something to eat. Remember Jesus is

speaking with his travelling companions who then had no regular jobs and certainly could never expect to own slaves. It was an impossible scenario. The meaning of this picture language? There is one condition for effective FAITH, we must use the faith we have and act with humility *as a servant* to help others.

Never, over the last 2000 years, has there been more than a minority of people who have *claimed* to be ‘Christians’, that have really lived according to Jesus’ way. Perhaps most of the time, we don’t either. But occasionally we are more aware of God and are enabled to forgive, be generous or compassionate as Jesus showed.

In those moments we know God’s grace at work in us. We instinctively know that there is more than us involved. It is something like artists or composers who confess, after they have accomplished something special, that they were touched by some influence or Power beyond their own power. Then we know a sense, however fleeting, of wholeness and integration.

Jesus did not waste his time enumerating the problems of living; his hearers knew those only too well. Nor did Jesus assign blame for what had gone wrong. He spoke in pictures about how change can take place. Each of us, his followers, has our role to live out.

There is a final ‘picture’ that I would like to leave with you, drawn not from the Bible but from an American theologian, Martin Marty, whom I read around 1969. I think he got the picture image from the very popular Drive-In Cinemas of that time. I believe it captures the inner meaning of those very strange apocalyptic passages replete with violent imagery (as in Mark 13 and the Book of Revelation) which seem to forecast judgement, torture, death and the end of all things. Beyond the horrors we know and find hard to contemplate, there is something more. Martin Marty said, **“The Christian gathering moves in the light of images bounced off the screen at the end of history”**.

Jesus revealed to us the outlines of the Kingdom of God towards which all our efforts as His followers are directed. We move towards that beckoning image, whatever the obstacles that get in our way. We, as individuals and together, are called to live his way. We may be cut down in our prime, we may fail in any particular project, but love, courage, compassion, justice and struggle for truth and peace will all have their unseen effect.

Our Christian action in society will be directed to enabling men, women and children to become more fulfilled, creative, and loving. It is not for us to hesitate or turn back because we may not succeed or be able to report good “outcomes”. Our immensely rewarding task is to follow the Way of Christ.

Every time we pray or meditate or join with others in worship, we could do no better than take to ourselves the advice from the Second Letter to Timothy 1:6: **“Rekindle the gift of God that is within you ... for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.”**

ⁱ *Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church: Reclaiming the Spirit of Jesus* by Bishop Geoffrey Robinson, Auxiliary Bishop in the Archdiocese of Sydney 1984-2004; published by John Garrett Publishing 2007, p52.

ⁱⁱ *Baptism – aligning ourselves with God*, sermon by Revd Clive Harcourt-Norton on 17 July 1988 at Service of Baptism & Eucharist, Anglican Parish of Hunters Hill – full sermon script available. While affirming much of what I wrote then, readers will note significant changes in how my thinking has changed since.

Enquiries, comments and criticisms are invited; also requests for additional copies of sermon scripts or permission to quote / reproduce.

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