

Sermon Notes

Pentecost 25
18 November 2007

St Mark's Anglican Church
South Hurstville
Preacher
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Readings: Isaiah 65.17-28; Song of Isaiah; 2 Thessalonians 3.6-13; Luke 21.5-19

A transforming witness

I have had the privilege of travelling to the Solomon Islands several times to visit our partner, the Anglican Church of Melanesia, and on each visit I spent a little time at the Christian Care Centre, which is the first women's refuge in the Solomon Islands, run by the Sisters of the Church. The Christian Care Centre is situated only metres from the shore in a rural part of the island of Guadalcanal, and the sisters have built a compound where they live and where women can come for rest and recovery from violent domestic situations. The Sisters' only neighbours are a few family groups which live in small encampments of one or more palm leaf shelters accessible by the beach or a small dirt path. One afternoon I walked with one of the sisters down the beach and we visited a woman who was sitting outside her hut weaving a grass mat. Seated before her was a small child, perhaps 18 months old. He had been born with some physical abnormality, and was not growing properly. His eyes rolled in his head and he rocked himself back and forth, screaming and tearing at his head, his hair, his skin. The sister came by regularly simply to hold the child, just to hold him and comfort him and to calm him a bit while his mother worked. There is no easy access to medical care or medication, and no money to pay for them. There is a good possibility that this child's life will be short, painful, and challenging for the family.

Isaiah writes: "No more shall be heard in Jerusalem the sound of weeping and the cry of distress. No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days." When I think of that little child, or of tens of thousands like him who will die today because of lack of clean water or access to medical care, it is easy to wonder about those visionary words. Where is the hope in the world we see today, when confronted with injustice, or violence, or needless suffering? When Isaiah writes, "be glad and rejoice for ever in that which I create", how do we reconcile that with the very real world in which we live? It is easier to think of Jesus' words and consider that the end times must be near, with famines and pestilence, wars and earthquakes, grief and loss.

Of course, Jesus knew about suffering. Jesus spoke those words we heard this morning knowing what was to come, knowing he would be betrayed and handed over to the authorities, tortured and killed in a cruel and prolonged manner. The author of the later chapters of Isaiah was writing to people who had known exile and war, violence and political uncertainty, and a constantly changing political landscape. Yet the comforting words of Isaiah speak of a time when the world they knew would be restored and God's covenant promise of love and faithfulness would be triumphant. Jesus also, even as he brought the assurance that his followers would face tribulations, could encourage his listeners by promising that the same Spirit of love and truth which he brought to them would be with them no matter how difficult the challenges before them.

How did they hold on to this hope? When confronted with the realities of our world today, it is possible to feel that those things are beyond us, that those beautiful words of the Old Testament, or the strength of faith which the disciples demonstrated, belong to a time past, which must somehow have been simpler than our own. But as I travel around and visit ABM's partners overseas, and here in Australia, I see a different picture. It seems to me that the bridge between the Biblical stories and our life today is love, sustained by hope. Jesus was speaking to his own culture and community, and yet what he was saying was destined to turn their world upside down. He was

saying that the relationship of love which the Father brings to the world is one which can never be broken and which will never fail. Those things which we see as so permanent and enduring in our world, like the Temple of Jesus' day, are nothing compared to the greater force of love. Those are strong words, in 1st century Palestine or here in 21st century Australia, for people like us who know how fallible our own human love can be. But Jesus promises that not only will God be with us as our world falls apart, God will see us through and bring us home. We will never be abandoned by God.

This promise of a better world is hard to believe sometimes, when confronted with the daily news of wars and famines, tsunamis and earthquakes, and the sordid individual tragedies of broken relationships, violence and despair with which our world appears to be filled. Today, as a result of the cyclone a few days ago on the coast of PNG, thousands of our brother and sister Anglicans are without shelter, food or clean water. Today in our world more than 800 million people will suffer from hunger and malnutrition, 1.1 billion people will not have access to clean drinking water and, every hour, 1,200 children will die from preventable diseases.¹ It sounds good in the Bible, but what difference does it make to those living in poverty in the slums of Manila, or in those coastal villages of PNG, or those facing a discouraging lack of opportunity in remote Aboriginal communities? Or even those of us living comfortable lives, in our homes with jobs and families and food on the table who yet feel that the world we live in is not the one God intended?

It is all about love. And it starts with us, today and everyday in our hearts and lives, in the ways in which we love and respond to others in need. Jesus' words come after watching the widow putting her small coins into the Temple offering, and observing that she has given more than those who were wealthy because she gave everything she had. God asks us to give everything we have. Isaiah's vision, God's vision, begins to be realised as we ourselves begin to live our lives according to God's laws of love. Jesus modelled for us what a life lived according to God's laws would look like, up to and including his humiliation by his own people and a painful and lingering death.

When I stayed in a village in the Philippines recently, two young women from Perth who were travelling with me were billeted with a young woman, Pureza, and her extended family. Before they left, Pureza gave the two pilgrims a kilo of rice as a gift, rice that the family had grown themselves and which was critical to them for food security. The gift meant that they might not have enough to eat later in the year. Generosity, practiced at this level, is an outpouring of love which is astonishing to many of us, because it demonstrates an unshakeable faith that God will provide, and that our own security is less important than honouring a relationship.

The Anglican Board of Mission was established by the Anglican Church of Australia as one way of responding in loving relationship to our brothers and sisters. From our origins assisting the Melanesian Mission in 1850, we have evolved to develop partnerships with Anglicans in countries around the world. In relationship with our partners and our neighbours, we support the Church's endeavours to bring hope and love to people's lives, to address issues of poverty and despair, and to live and work as Jesus called us to do. Through ABM, Australian Anglicans are in relationship with Christians around the world who are seeking to serve others.

The needs of today are very similar to the needs of those described in the Bible. Jesus talks to his followers about food and harvests, caring for sheep and fruit-bearing trees. The Church in the Philippines, supported by ABM, is assisting communities with environmental management programs and a variety of water and agricultural projects to help improve the quality of people's lives. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus talks about suffering as a result of allegiance to God. Around the world, thousands of Christians are unable to practise their faith freely, and many are in jail for following Jesus. In the Diocese of Egypt and North Africa, ABM is supporting the Anglican Church as it seeks to witness to God's love in ways which are transformative, in a country where

¹ http://www.undp.org/publications/annualreport2006/equitable_growth.shtml

open witness to the Christian faith is prohibited.

In the book of Isaiah, the author writes of rejoicing in the joy of God's abundant creation. In the Philippines, the Church supported by ABM is translating liturgical materials into local languages so that people can indeed rejoice together in language which is meaningful to them. In PNG, the Church is supporting the Melanesian Brotherhood, who bring a ministry of hope to the poorest communities of the country, and to help people to live lives of abundance and joy. And here in Australia, the Church supported by ABM is strengthening Indigenous Christian leadership so that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can also praise God and live with hope and love in the midst of very real challenges.

Like us, Jesus also lived in a world where there was hardship and suffering, and where people were crying out for hope and healing. Like us, the people of that time would have wondered how to make sense of a society which held injustice and poverty. Jesus taught us to follow his own example, and promised us that God will always be with us to sustain us, even in the midst of trials and tribulations. And as we hear that message, as we are inspired by the Holy Spirit, I believe we will see the world transformed. But it requires us to respond with love, in relationship to God and one another, to give generously of our talents and time and heart and money, so that we and our brothers and sisters around the world may stand together and rejoice in the promise that one day children will grow to old age, that people will not toil in vain but be blessed by the Lord, and that the wolf and the lamb will lie down together – that nothing will hurt or destroy in all the holy creation of God. This is the vision which God has provided to inspire us, but it is up to us to make it real.

May the Spirit of God strengthen each one of us this day to live so closely to God that we may be united in God's transforming love and so transform the world. Amen.