

Sermon Notes

St Mark's Anglican Church
South Hurstville

Pentecost
27 May 2007

Preacher
The Reverend Clive H Norton
Visiting priest

Readings: Acts 2.11-21; Psalm 104.26-36; Romans 8.12-17; John 14.8-17

*40th Anniversary of the 1967 Australian Referendum
that gave recognition to Indigenous people as citizens of their own country*

God is always present

It usually takes time for the significance of some event or some person to have impact on people. It took time for the significance of people, who have lived during the life-time of many of us here, to be recognized. Many of us were inspired by Mahatma Gandhi, Albert Schweitzer, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Dag Hammarskjöld, Martin Luther King, Mother Theresa, Trevor Huddleston, Desmond Tutu, Nelson Mandela and in Australia, people like Faith Bandler and Charles Perkins leaders in the struggle for human rights of the Indigenous people and enslaved labourers brought to this country. But it took time for what they said and did to be heard and heeded.

It was the same with Jesus. He only lived for about 30 years, between 4 BC and 30 AD. While he was alive only a tiny, and certainly very insignificant, group of people in a troublesome outpost of the Roman Empire took much notice of him. He was a Jewish “person of no fixed abode” – an immediate cause for alarm and suspicion, and he talked about FAITH, HOPE, and LOVE. The religious and political authorities became alarmed because he claimed he was acting for something he called “the Kingdom of God”. Religious leaders heard this claim as blasphemy and heresy; politicians heard it as treachery and a call to insurrection.

In the Gospel reading for today, Jesus is reported as saying, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father... Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me... the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these...” No wonder the religious establishment wanted him silenced, claiming to be in God and God in him.

But it is too easy to point fingers at the Roman occupiers of Palestine and at the Jewish leaders doing what they thought was best to prevent a vicious military crackdown by the Romans if Jesus or any hot-head provoked an insurrection.

What Jesus was saying was not just a challenge to the religious authorities – it is a challenge to every person and every level in society.

1. His call to have FAITH in God was spelt out by the way he lived. He demonstrated by his inter-action with ordinary people, that every person is to be valued because God values them. As a practicing Jew, he boldly stood out and said that many Jewish cultural and religious customs had got it wrong. The sick were not being punished by God; it was wrong to shun the crippled, the disabled or a woman with incurable bleeding; hospitality should be given to aliens /foreigners; women exploited by men or driven to prostitution in order to survive should be helped, not judged... they are all included in God’s love, and the energising, healing Spirit of God is theirs for the asking.
2. His call to Hope is inherent in his talk about becoming part of “the Kingdom of God”. Take the initiative! he said. As individuals and as communities in this world, live out the higher truths that holy men and women for centuries have been advocating. Progress in human affairs does come about by going on doing what past generations have done. As Moshin Hamid, the Pakistani novelist in Australia with his book, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, said this week, one of our greatest risks today is looking back. But in Jesus’ time, and still in our

21st century global world, popular opinion and political leaders, get trapped in the past. There is no future in carrying grudges, seeking revenge, retaliation and reparations – how much of our thinking is this way? The imposition of harsh reparations on Germany after the 1914-1918 war demanded by France and Britain particularly, led inexorably to the rise of Hitler and the Second World War.

When will we learn? Only when enough follow the Way shown by Jesus and others like the list of some of my heroes, modern ‘saints’ moved by the Spirit of God with which I started this sermon. Only when we break free of our self-centred narcissism, our tribalism and classism, and from instinctive tit-for-tat reactions against people with whom we disagree, and seek to grow up into being mature human beings. We have to learn to use our skills and resources – including on occasions inescapably some force – to RESTRAIN the commission of violence and injustice against other people. This will not happen so long as religious and political leaders use rabble rousing rhetoric to project the problem onto ‘others’ and exaggerating the fears of what ‘they may do’. We should look and hope for change in the Kingdom of God.

3. Jesus the itinerant Jewish rabbi, when asked a direct question summed up the essential teachings of Judaism by combining two quotations from the Hebrew sacred scrolls of Deuteronomy and Leviticus: ***‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’*** *This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’* *On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.*

In a sense everything else Jesus said and did, everything Paul, Peter, Luke, John and others wrote in the what we call the New Testament, is to be read and interpreted as commentary and specific illustrations of those two fundamental ‘commandments’ or basic laws for living as part of what Jesus called ‘the Kingdom of God or Heaven’ and the 4th Gospel, John, calls ‘eternal life’.

Jesus repudiated tribal customs and cultural pressures when he said, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy’. But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...” (Matthew 5:43). The Apostle Paul expressed the same attitude: “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Paul in Romans 12:21).

Paul was a travelling tent-maker. Paul did indeed ‘do greater works’ than Jesus himself had done. Jesus lived all his life in Palestine and was heard by a few thousand of his countrymen, some Samaritans, Canaanites, soldiers and travellers, but most of his close followers except some of the women melted away when he was arrested and executed.

But Paul carried the teachings of Jesus’ inclusive teachings about Faith, Hope and Love into foreign lands and to the centre of the Roman Empire. In the earlier reading today we heard some words from his letter to Christians at Rome written in AD 57 or 58 – that is 28 to 34 years after Jesus’ crucifixion. By then people of an immense range of tribes, races, colours, and backgrounds – women who were subordinate to men in a patriarchal society, slaves and others who were treated as outcasts of non-persons – had become followers of Jesus’ Way. Paul wrote, ***“All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. You did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, ... when we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God...”*** *The use of both the Aramaic and Greek names for ‘Father’ joins Jew and non-Jew alike in this cry that comes from deep within us. It connects us directly to Jesus. It was Jesus who first called God ‘Abba’ (‘Dad’)¹.*

It took and it takes a long time for new thought to permeate and change society. Paul had found

¹ from *With Love to the World* for 21 May 2007

that over those 30 or so years. Leaders of the Christian church in Jerusalem, and even Simon Peter called by Jesus “the rock on which I will build my church”, objected to non-Jews being brought into the church unless they observed Jewish religious and cultural norms like the men undergoing circumcision and converts observing dietary laws. That long on-going conflict in the early church is brilliantly enacted in the play by the British writer Howard Brenton, in the drama called ‘PAUL’ at the Belvoir Street Theatre (Sydney), which is playing till 3 June 2007.

We on this Pentecost Sunday are here to carry on the essentially inclusive outreach of The Way taught by Jesus and globalized by Paul. There are hundreds of thousands, millions who like the playwright Howard Brenton cannot without question accept old theories or doctrines propounded by institutional churches or other religions, but who are seeking “something more”.

Over the arch in the house in Zurich, Switzerland, where the renowned psychologist Carl Jung lived, these words are inscribed: ***“Called or not called, God is always present”***.

Many are seeking “something more” as they were in Jesus’ time. They do not want pre-packaged “answers”, but sensitive companionship on the Way.

Each of us has to make that journey ourselves, and the best way to do it is by sharing honestly with others what “faith, hope, and love” means to us. A starting point is to be very conscious as we encounter other people that, even though they may not yet be aware of God, that “Called or not called, God is always present”.

Enquiries, comments and criticisms are invited; also requests for additional copies of sermon scripts or permission to quote / reproduce. The Reverend Clive H. Norton, phone (02) 9411 8606; fax 9410 2069
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