

Extraordinary Behaviour Pentecost 20 – 10th October 2010

Readings:

Luke 17: 11-19

Jesus is out in the sticks - in between Samaria and Galilee, on the very edge of acceptable society. Not the bible belt nor the centre of religious activity - but in a place where you're likely to find desperate people. And sure enough - Jesus finds them, because he is willing to go where they are. And heals them. No questions asked. The lepers are a mixed bunch who didn't particularly deserve healing - they had shown no faith, just crying for mercy from the margins. And when healed they've shown no gratitude, well, all except one. Extraordinary - but if ever there was healing that reflects God's extraordinary grace, it's this one. And who is it that says thanks?

A Samaritan! The least deserving of all according to the dominant religious culture of the day. The gospel writer, Luke constantly surprises his readers by showing Jesus reaching out to the most unworthy. His lesson: God cares for us despite who we are; God's love is not just for the deserving, it's not even just for the thankful.

Extraordinary news : to those who would exclude
to those who think they are better
to those who think you need to pass a test
before acceptance into God's community, the church!

Extraordinary News!

Living in God's Now

Jeremiah 29: 1, 4-7

I know of a man, a Dutchman, who has been in Australia as long as me. And he hates it! Blames Australia for his son being born with Cerebral Palsy. 'Wouldn't have happened in Holland.' Doctors here are hopeless! Life here is hopeless. He's just split up with his wife of over 30 years. She's hopeless too he says. Sadly he's a man in exile.

And perhaps it would have helped him if he had taken to heart Jeremiah's pastoral letter to a people in exile. For Jeremiah is writing to exiles pining for home. And when you find yourself, uprooted from all you know and love, you are faced with two choices. When my family emigrated half-way around the world, we were faced with two choices. You either make peace with the land you're in or you live in misery. You either choose to live in the now - or you can fantasize about that place you call home. It took my first trip "back home" to Scotland to convince me that home was here in the place where we had made a new life. Indeed the "home" I had imagined no longer existed. People had got on with their lives quite well without me!

Learning to live in the present is the key to spiritual, emotional, physical wholeness. When we dwell in the past, disappointment and depression is sure to follow. Like Peter we yearn for what no longer is. And when we obsess about the future, we can often be crippled with anxiety, or so filled with plans that we fail to enjoy God's gift of the now.

So as an antidote we hear Jeremiah's letter to those leaders captured into exile after the first sacking of Jerusalem and Judah in 597 BCE.

Build/Live/Plant/Procreate - That's Jeremiah's word of hope to those living in exile. Jeremiah was preparing the Jewish people for life without a temple, life without political power, life in a society that was not at all sympathetic to their faith in God.

And for Christians, living in Launceston in 2010, it can feel a little like living in exile - life is passing us by. How we long for our past glory days when our churches were filled with young families, lots of children, where the church enjoyed a privileged place, where church leaders were listened to and respected. But now we are in exile and Jeremiah's letter is also for us, encouraging us to engage in our community, right here in Launceston.

Build/Live/Plant/Procreate.

And perhaps it can be for us as it was for the Jewish people of the exile. They took Jeremiah's advice. They lived in the present, they built new lives, new ways of worshipping without a temple and without priests, and so it was that the key religious liturgy for Jews was shifted from the Temple to the home in the celebration of Shabbat, the sabbath meal. And they interacted with dominant culture, but in such a way that they were not absorbed into that community. They developed a new identity under God. It is not an accident that the Hebrew Scriptures were largely written during that time, stories that emphasized who they were and who their God was. The story of God's deliverance of his people through the Exodus was written at that time, another exile story where eventually God brought his people to the Promise Land. The subtext of that story for the exiles - God will do the same again.

Today, we live in a culture that no longer sees Christianity as relevant. And perhaps, if we are honest, we have partly contributed to that view since in many ways our deeds no longer reflect what we say we believe, who we say we are.

But perhaps being in exile, finding ourselves in a strange land will offer us an opportunity to truly minister in our community - not by being holy, aloof but by being open like Jesus caring encounters that always matched his preaching.

In our Gospel reading Jesus chose not to be absorbed into the religious and cultural milieu of his time. He ate and drank with those considered sinners. He touched and healed those considered unclean. But it is interesting to note that only one of the ten lepers chose Jesus' radical inclusive way. Isn't it interesting the other nine chose to return to the dominant culture, where they would have absorbed themselves with the purity rules of religion. Jesus calls us into loving relationships, with him, with neighbour, with the community we find ourselves in. And to do that we need a clear sense of who and whose we are. That's the only point of a Sunday or any other day service to equip us to minister in our community.

As Jeremiah says in his letter to the exiles, “..seek ***the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.***”

Let me finish with these words:

THE CONGREGATION OF PILGRIM SEEKS:

***To be a church that invites
people to be disciples of Jesus Christ
together with us..***

***To be a church that cares for
and about people to an extent
that we actively engage in
pastoral care, welfare,
social responsibility and justice...***

***To be a church where worship
of God (Creator, the Christ- God with us, and the Holy Spirit)
is a response to God’s action
and a sign of hope for the world....***

***To be a church of vitality
wherein people grow in their relationship
with Jesus the Christ
and in their understanding of the gospel***

***To be a church committed to worship,
prayer and spiritual nurture
of the community.***

And if these words sound familiar they should. They are the covenant goals accepted by this congregation whereby we can: “..seek ***the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.***”

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