

SERMON

The Rt Rev'd Dr Matt Brain

Installation as Bishop of Bendigo

Saturday, 17 February 2018

May the words of my lips and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

There are large sections of North West Australia that seem to exist as if having been baked in a kiln. It is a stunning but harsh land. Many times I have driven through these spaces marvelling at the wide expanse of sky, baked rocky ground and dry red dust, skimming the surface at 110 and insulated from the heat by the air conditioner. I would fear those moments when stopping and stepping out of the car became necessary. It is so hot and looks so harsh. No life, just scorched ground.

Friends, being church can often feel very similar. We can feel as if we are under pressure from a range of sides, at best a monument to the past – at worst a dry, dusty, deadening and dangerous institution. It has become impossible to ignore critiques of the church. Be they official such as that made rightly through the Royal Commission, or more mundane as people lose interest and simply slip away.

So it is in this context that we begin a new lap of life together in service of and fellowship with God. It is easy to become disheartened in such a world, defensive or content to stay locked in our comfortable vehicles speeding along and cocooned from reality. Yet it is necessary for our spiritual health and life to stop and pay attention to what God is up to here, in our world and our lives together. Even if it does mean stepping out into the heat. This is why I have chosen for us to celebrate the Feast of the Holy Innocents today – to hear the awful passage read in which a tyrant, insecure in his power lashes out murdering little ones, devastating a community. It is full of horror, injustice and sheer madness amplified by the realisation that Jesus, the focus of Herod's ferocious violence, did not even desire his throne. It is from this terrible story, and the paired Epistle (I John 1) we find God's call for our future: to be a people of humility and hope.

Whenever we read one of the narrative portions of scripture it is interesting to ponder which seat we see ourselves in, or whose sandals we find most comfortable. I suspect that just like when watching a movie we will be attracted to the good character, the 'white hats' or the protagonists on the side of rightness and justice. However, St Matthew's account of Herod's slaughter of the Innocents raises some very searching questions that challenge what I suspect would be our natural

reading of ourselves as being one of the ‘innocents’: running away beside Mary and Joseph or grieving alongside the parents. In many ways and situations this may be so. Yet as we sit here today as one part of the church gathered, it is necessary for us to recognise the way that we sit in a position of power and inherited strength. This has become particularly apparent through the stories exposed by the Royal Commission. Too often we as an institution have prioritised the maintenance of our position and privilege over dealing justly with those we have hurt.

This becomes particularly apparent when we examine the Old Testament context Matthew understood the story of the Innocents to be framed by. The heart rending cry of Rachel: refusing to be comforted because her children are no more, is embedded in Jeremiah 31 which is itself a painful reminder of what was lost when God’s people refused to follow God’s way and sought to establish themselves under their own power. We today are confronted with a humbling reality that for those abused within our churches we have too often been Herod pursuing, Israel wandering from God’s path. This is a reality that we must not try and explain away, resile from or avoid. We must be a humbled people. We are to be a people brought to our knees before those we have wronged and dependent upon God like the little family who ran from Herod. We have to be prepared to ‘take off our shoes and walk in the dust’ as it were, owning our need for repentance and restoration.

Yet today the compilers of the lectionary have done us a service by pairing the Gospel with the Epistle from I John. Just as the Gospel is uncompromising in its narrative so the Epistle is in its proposition. “God is light and in him there is no darkness … NONE AT ALL!” (I John 1:5b) We cannot expect to be a people blessed by God, much less a blessing to others if we do not grapple with the reality of God who is light. To share this light is a high calling, and one that I am certainly not fit to fulfil if left to my own devices. It is not even only the nooks and crannies of my heart that bears this out, but also the propensity to darkness will break out all too frequently in the harsh word or self-interested action or bitter thought. And I have a sneaking suspicion that as I get to know you there will be dark parts lurking within you too. This is why the frank exposure we have felt through the Royal Commission and all that it has entailed is a good thing. In a heart inclined to darkness we will need reminders that (in the words of Darryl Kerrigan), if we claim to be without sin “we’re dreamin’.” And so it leaves us with a conundrum: how to seek, satisfy and savour the God who is light. And so clearly we have a mandate for humility, yet we are also to be a people of hope.

Having heard the reading from I John, and having (I hope) an inkling of what Christianity is about, it will not surprise you that I am now turning to consider Jesus. Jesus is for us both advocate and atonement. An advocate who will faithfully take up the case of the humbled before the source of all light. In a different part of the New Testament St Paul references this in his experience of not being abandoned when pursued; and the writer to the Hebrews sharpens it further by describing Jesus as being able to sympathise with our weakness. This speaks to a warmth of relationship and intention

that can and should give us confidence of a durable and satisfying experience of God and the goodness that sharing in his light brings.

The second aspect is that of being an atoning sacrifice. This bears the weight of justice that we must face as those called to own up to the reality of our own share in the darkness brought into God's world. I hope that you yearn for justice to reign, for wrongs to be put right, for relationship to be cleared so that freedom may flow. Yet John reminds his dear children that they cannot simply stand and bemoan the darkness wrought by others, but must face that which they (and we dear sisters and brothers) must own. And so the news of the sympathetic advocate willing to bear the right weight of consequence due us who so damage and darken what God has made is great news indeed. So this Jesus who knows us, loves us and values us also provides the means by which we may return. He is the one who was willing and able to bear the weighty demands of God's justice and to allow return.

Friends, just as the call to take seriously, to participate in God's light is a high call, the joyful reality of the way being made for us to do so is an expansive call. It is personal, but it is not private; it belongs to each of those who grasp hold of Jesus but it does not remain their possession. Did you hear that this Jesus – the one who came to turn aside the consequence of our darkness before God – did so not for us alone but also for the whole world. We who have seen and held, beheld and touched Jesus the Messiah, the eternal Son of God cannot act as if the new opportunity for life in the light belongs to us alone. We are called out of our insular state into a profound willingness to serve the world around us. We are called from an attitude of self-satisfied pride to one of humble dependence; not on the weight of accumulated asset but on Jesus.

So it is with this in mind that I draw you back to the Gospel reading, and to that little family who had to run. For while we must face the reality that at times and for some we have sat in Herod's seat, we also have the invitation to slip into Mary and Joseph's sandals. As Mary and Joseph gathered up the infant Jesus and ran they abandoned themselves to God. They did not know what the outcome would be, they did not know how they would survive, they did not know where they would set up house and settle, they did not even know whether their cash card would work in the foreign ATM's. They simply knew that they had to entrust themselves to God and having done so they experienced the incredible reality of being caught up in God's plan that far outstripped what I suspect was their vision for their own lives.

So as Matthew reflects on Herod's wickedness, God's call, and Mary and Joseph's frightened but faithful response he can say that this was the moment when the patient, divine work of 2000 years (from Abraham to the Nativity) was fulfilled, for a couple of years later 'Out of Egypt God called his Son.' Mary and Joseph discovered that they participated, no more than this, through responding to God's call they enabled the progressive fulfillment of God's plan for the world. A dynamic relationship of trust and fulfillment played out.

I probably should not admit this to you – you may well want to take me back to the shop and demand a refund – but I love loud, heavy music. The ‘Queens of the Stone Age’ are one group that plays raucous rock n’ roll. They sum up something about life through a line in one of their songs, “Give me something I can die for, to make it beautiful to live.” At one level this is an over the top youth-filled expression, however the band has actually expressed one of the core developmental tasks that young people need to fulfil if they are to grow as healthy adults. Young people are hard-wired to seek out a ‘life-task’ or path that is sufficiently robust and significant to set their heart upon. Or in other words to passionately pursue. They – we – need something to die for to make it beautiful to live.

Now at this pivotal stage of life Mary and Joseph got given the rare opportunity to do just that and consequently discovered God’s faithful provision. They discovered a vision of life that was intensely personal, yet with universal ramifications; that was itching to be told, yet profoundly altered their action; that affected the interior self and played out for all to see. They discovered that when they were weak God was strong.

Friends we live in an exciting time to be God’s people, to be God’s church. The demands upon us that bring us low are also a grace for us so that we may be a people of humility, desperate to experience provision through Jesus...and in doing so holding out hope to a world in despairing need.

I did not finish the story about my journeys through the hot and harsh North of Western Australia. I would fear those times when I had to stop and step out of the air-conditioned car. Yet when I did, when I slowed down and braved the heat I would only need to take a couple of steps to discover what could not be seen from the insulated and speeding car. There were green shoots everywhere. Some were tough and wiry, some were fragile and fresh, all were alive and beautiful. I just needed to get out and look!