

Make his paths straight

St Philip's Anglican Church O'Connor
Second Sunday of Advent—7 December 2014
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Isaiah 40.1-11; Psalm 85.1-2, 8-13; 2 Peter 3.8-15a; Mark 1.1-8

How many of you know the freeway between Sydney and Newcastle? How many of you remember what the journey was like before the freeway was built? I barely remember the old Pacific Highway but my parents would tell us tales of driving on the highway in my father's light 15 Citroen, weaving their way around the sandstone hills and across the Hawkesbury. Work on the new freeway began in 1963, the year I was born, but it was not until 1968 that the massive bridge across the Hawkesbury was built. I still remember my father telling me that he made the girders for that bridge. We used to travel from Newcastle to Sydney quite a lot, as my parents had family in that part of the world. I have vivid memories of watching the road change over the many years from a little windy road into the massive six-lane extravagance we have today. Through those years I saw the machinery that came and leveled mountains and hauled away tones of sandstone. I was enthralled with the massive cuttings that dwarfed our little cortina as we speed along. To my young eyes it was amazing—amazing that human beings could make straight a pathway that had been daunting, dangerous and slow. I am still amazed by it—a highway in the wilderness—well, what seemed like a wilderness at the time. I am amazed by the ingenuity that prepared and constructed that highway.

And so I am intrigued by the notion of a highway that is mentioned in the Isaiah reading. A heavenly voice, a prophet, announces, “make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” Previously in Isaiah 33 the prophet laments the state of the country and people’s actions. He says, *“Listen! the valiant cry in the streets; the envoys of peace weep bitterly. The highways are deserted, travelers have quit the road. The treaty is broken, its oaths are despised, its obligation is disregarded. The land mourns and languishes.”*

A highway in the time of Isaiah was the major link between cities and communities. Having a safe highway was critical and there were clauses in treaties between kingdoms and places would ensure safe travel. Yet Isaiah points out that the highways are deserted and that travelers have quit the road for fear of their lives. The people have broken their word and those that work for peace are in mourning. People have abandoned the way of peace. They have abandoned the way of justice.

The biblical prophets have a timeless message for us—we do live in a time when the land mourns and languishes, when promises are broken and obligations disregarded. The basic human obligation to treat others with honour and respect, let alone love and compassion, is sometimes a distant memory in our entertainments, politics and civil society. We miss the signs of that call over and over again. Partly because we have stopped listening and noticing and partly because we live in a culture that is deaf to God’s word and call and frequently actively hostile to anything to do with religion or faith or even the sense of the numinous and transcendent.

God who is love is always reaching into our lives calling us to peace, unity, love and wholeness. God keeps on calling, keeps on coming to us in each moment offering a different way. In Advent we prepare for the coming of the Lord, the coming that has happened, will happen and is happening right now. We prepare for this peace and wholeness, this restoration and redemption. Today both Isaiah and John the Baptist urge us to make the way straight.

The earliest Christians were not called Christians. They were called people of the Way—the way of following in the footsteps of Christ. As Jesus himself said, the way is narrow and difficult. It is not easy to remain true to the faithful God who never abandons us in world that wants to forget God. It is not easy to practice compassion and forgiveness in a culture that idolizes competition and violence. It is not easy to walk the path of peace in a world that seems driven apart by war and conflict. Making the way straight in the wilderness of our hearts and the world around us seems to me a daunting task. When I think about the freeway between Sydney and Newcastle, it was a mammoth task to make the ways straight and true. How do we proclaim the way of Christ to a world that has stopped listening? How do we excavate the great rocky depths of our own hearts?

When workmen began to construct that toll way back in 1963 they had to clear the mountains. They had to move rocks, dirt and plants. They had literally to shift a mountain of stuff. What stuff is lying deep within you that needs to be excavated and done away with? Is it fear? Is it resentment about a past situation or event that still sits in your heart? Is it guilt or shame about past mistakes and wrongs? Is it a feeling of worthlessness, of not being good enough? Is it that you feel hurt and wounded by what someone has said and or done? Is it avoidance behaviours?

Or is it just plain sins of commission—you know: greed, envy, lust, wrath, gluttony, pride or sloth? That was seven in case you were not counting!

There is a bit of a confusing element in all of this as well. It could be taken that we have to build the way of the Lord by being morally good, that, somehow, whether God comes or not depends on our efforts, as if we could magically conjure God up by good deeds and faithful living. Instead the good news says that God is already here and is leading us onwards. What we need to do is clear the highways of our own hearts so we can discern God's call and presence. Walking in God's pathways, free and true, is our obedient response to God's grace. So it is not a matter of clearing the highways so that the Lord can arrive unencumbered. It is about clearing the paths so we can see Jesus ahead of us, leading us on into that kingdom land of healing and wholeness. I was intrigued to read just recently about Lancelot Andrewes, Dean of Westminster Cathedral and one of the translators of the King James Bible. He would spend at least five hours every morning in prayer and he remarked that if someone called on him before midday they clearly did not believe in God. Lancelot certainly cleared the way so he could see Go. The King James Bible is a testament to that discipline.

Just as each of us need to look into our own hearts and do some excavating and offloading of those things that are getting in the way of seeing God and knowing his love in our lives, maybe as a parish we need to consider those things that are getting in the way of us living into fullness of life under the guidance of God's Spirit. Is it attachment to the things of the past? Is it fear? Is it a sense of hopelessness? I wonder—are we revealing Jesus or are we revealing our own attachments and wants?

We will shortly join together in celebrating the last time that Jesus shared food and wine with his disciples. The Eucharistic prayer is always about the central aspect of our faith, Jesus Christ, and his death and resurrection. In the communion we do our best to bring Christ to the front and centre of our hearts and minds. The prayers and readings, the confession and silences are how we build that highway, how we open up the way, that then allows us to see God more clearly. May what we do here in church be how we live every moment of every day. Amen.