

A Grief and Hope

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
3rd Sunday in Lent—28 February 2016
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Isaiah 55.1-9; Luke 13.31-35

How important do you reckon that listening is in human encounter? My guess is that most people think that that listening is critical. Without it we cannot have meaningful human relationships. You have been to that memorable dinner party, work meeting or community group where someone will not stop. Everybody is overridden. And no-one seems able or willing to stop them

Today's readings all reflect on listening. God calls on the people to listen after the return from exile; a poet listens to God in the Psalm, Paul asks the Corinthians to stop and listen to the ancient scriptures so that they could hear God speak again, and Jesus asks Jerusalem to listen to his message of healing and freedom for all.

Isaiah's plea for the people of God to listen: Isaiah 55.1-9

In this passage from Isaiah the prophet offers an invitation to people who were puzzled by the terrible things that had happened to them in the exile. They had lost land, king and temple; they had suffered the indignities of exile and those events had shattered their identity and their sense of purpose. They were trying to make a new life for themselves and with God.

On their return to the land they had gone about the business of living; building houses; farming, having families and seeking to build a new life. But on what grounds would that new life be built? What would their identity be and what purpose would they serve now that all the old markers were gone?

God calls them to participate in a great feast, a common image and the practice at the time (1-2). The feast is free and full of all the necessities such as water and food and some of the extras such as wine and rich food. God longs to establish his rule among the people, a rule of justice, love mercy and peace and to protect his people.

But they need to listen: "Listen carefully to me." Listening (2b-3) is a key element of relationship with God. Listening precedes all other spiritual activities and without it we cannot obey God because we have no idea what we should be doing. Listening indicates the personal nature of the relationship with God. Listening is the way of finding life.

Let's explore this little. Clues are found in the verbs seeking, calling, forsaking and returning. Notice that these are all relational terms.

We seek some one who is lost. Has God got lost? No, but the idea is provocative. We have found God so uninteresting or boring that he went off to another party. Seek him as leaves the door.

Call out to him to come back, to join with us. Let those who ignored God pay attention, be involved, listen closely, and engage again.

The image is about restoration of a relationship gone sour, about the reversal of a fractured friendship. That God would even bother boggles the mind. That's why Isaiah adds the words: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts and my ways are not your ways, says the Lord."

Just as well they are so far removed from ours. God woos us in this image.

And this is what Lent is about. It is not about us doing things for God. It is about God wooing

us, asking us to be still, asking to hush our minds and activities so that we may seek him. Perhaps we ought to give up activities rather than things in Lent. We need to learn to quieten our minds and bend our hearts to seeking.

And the point of that is to find out who we are to be. That might seem a very strange thing to say but it has been coming through this Lent as we have studied Luke. What is the point of being the people of God?

Isaiah makes it clear in 3-5. The Davidic king may be no more but the covenant with David still stands. Only this time it is made with the people. This time they are the royalty who will represent the character of God to the nations. What will they represent?

Because of their experience they will be able to point to the water of life, to the gracious, living friendship of God. They will be able to testify the spiritual riches of God. They will be able from their experience to point to God's love, forgiveness, reconciliation, peace and justice.

This is the task of the people of God. It has no other. Everything we do must serve this one thing. So in Lent stop doing and test out the relationship.

Paul's plea to the people of God to listen

Paul also speaks prophetically to the people of Corinth some 500 hundred years later in the epistle reading today. He uses the Exodus wanderings as a cautionary tale.

He explains to his mainly gentile audience how easy it is to fall into idolatry. He further explains how quickly releasing hold on the living God leads to self-indulgence in every element of life. The refusal to listen to God has serious social and personal consequences.

“So if you think you are standing watch out that you do not fall.” (12)

We won't explore this in detail today. All we need to do is to remind ourselves we are as prone to losing God as the ancients were. We will just do it in a different way.

Jesus pleads for Jerusalem to listen Luke 13.31-35

And then there is Jesus call for Jerusalem to listen.

Jerusalem is not only his destination but the city has great significance for him. It is the ancient place of God's dwelling, yet so often in the history of the people of Israel God seems to have been banished from it.

Jesus, as the bearer of the word of God's restoration and healing for his people must go the very centre of the household of the people of God. He must speak to the heart of the nation.

Jesus speaks like a prophet and offers fateful warnings about Jerusalem and the danger it is in. This fits in with Jesus' role as prophet who saw that second Temple Judaism had lost its way and needed to come back to God and renew its vocation as the light of the world.

Some of the people want to turn to violence and Jesus sees the end result of the pursuit of violence for God's people is violence. It is like a fire in a farmyard (not one of our raging bushfires). If the animals cannot escape they panic. Some animals develop ways of combating the terror. I am told that sometimes after a fire a dead hen has been found, scorched and blackened – with live chicks sheltering under her wings. She has literally given her life to save them.

This is a vivid and violent image of what Jesus declared he longed to do for Jerusalem and the people of God. For the moment all he could see was chicks running about in all directions, either unaware of the danger or driven by fear into catastrophic action.

Like us Jesus lived in a menagerie. There was not only the danger of fire but of predators as well. And in this case the local predator was one of the Herod dynasty. Some kindly disposed Pharisees warn Jesus about the ever-present danger of a violent man who came from a lineage of violent men – men who would destroy all to keep their petty and illegitimate power intact.

Jesus knew the great and the small dangers of being a prophet, of living out the life of God that Isaiah spoke of. There are bigger things afoot than Herod dreamed of. Herod is a contemptible minor player. Yes, he will play a minor role but he is of no ultimate significance.

Jesus must go on bringing the life of God, the liberating kingdom of God, into the lives of men and women. That is all that matters – to live the kingdom of reversal, of reconciliation, of peace, of wholeness and bring it into people's lives.

Jesus will die in Jerusalem; give his life for the chicks, so that they may become bearers of the kingdom of life.

Judgement and hope both hang in the air. They are the possibilities that confronted the people in Isaiah's day and in ours. We think of judgement as a negative penalty imposed from on high. In the Bible judgement is much more the time of decision. Now is the time of decision

In the time of decision, a problem is confronted and an opportunity is given to assess where to go from here. A time of judgement is a time for seeking, calling, returning, forsaking. A time of judgement is thus a time of hope.

God always makes sure there is hope. We may have to seek it to find it, but there is always hope.

Conclusion

Lent is time of a time of judgement – a time of hope. A time of judgement for we must now make it much clearer who we are and what the life of God means for us.

It is a time of hope because we have the living Christ ready to work out his kingdom of freedom in and through us.

“Ho everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come buy, and eat.”