

## Third Sunday after Epiphany 2021

Our readings this morning have a common thread running through them, it's a thread that runs through our lives too, or at least it should. It is a thread that speaks about reassessment, change, renewal, repentance, it's a thread that tells us that the time for such things is always now.

We are in this period between Epiphany and Lent when our attention is being drawn to the person of Christ, who is both beginning *and* culmination, Alpha *and* Omega. The scene for the season was set by the Magi for whom nothing, not even the way home, would be the same. The Messiah is the one spoken of by the prophets, according to the scribes advising Herod and yet he is unlike any of the predictions, he is, the very embodiment of renewal and repentance. So our work during this time is not just *who* is it that we welcome but *what* does it mean? What is the outworking of this coming? Mark helps us this morning, and clearly repentance is a first order issue. Jesus' first words in the first gospel, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'

Unfortunately many folk see this business of repentance as simply confession of sin. There is something in this, of course, but sin is not just something that we do. Indeed more often than not it is what we fail to do, but even more than what we do or don't do the scriptures tell us that it is something that possesses us, something that becomes our norm. We can become very hung up on bad habits that are difficult to break and it seems sometimes that Lent, and the Christian life generally, is solely about this - whether we are eating too much chocolate or not going to church regularly or not being generous enough. I wonder sometimes if we indeed know most of the sins that we commit, probably not because they become our norm, they way things are. Remember those words from Psalm 19 'Who can know their own unwitting sins?: O cleanse me from my secret faults.'

Yes, we can become very moralistic about our sin and the sins of others. Think of last week's passage from Paul, that tricky passage about fornication, but think too about the context of Paul's letter to the Corinthians, their divisions. It is about so much more than just personal morality, as we heard it is about wasted opportunity, it is about the true intimacy we find in Christ and it's outworking, it is about unity in its fullest.

When we look closely at our scriptures we realise that the prophets, among them Jesus, were often, not always but often, speaking out not about us as individuals but as a community. Not your personal failings, but those of the nation, a people, a religion. When Jesus says 'repent, and believe in the good news' there is nothing to suggest he is speaking to individuals he is speaking to Israel, he is calling their failure to be one.

Once again during the week our nation will celebrate its national day marking, as it does, the arrival of the First Fleet in 1788 and the establishment of a British Colony on this continent. Each year the celebration seems to become increasingly problematic. In that gloriously enigmatic passage from Paul this morning we are 'those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing' particularly as we become better informed about the culture of the indigenous people of this land and about the nature of the colonial era. The issue of our reconciliation with the indigenous people of this land is surely a first order issue for us as Christians committed to justice and peace through unity.

We as a nation have made a number of gestures and statements concerning the indigenous people of this land. The 1967 Referendum, the Mabo Land Rights Claims, the 'Sorry' statement from the then PM Kevin Rudd. We have in recent times even changed the national anthem to better reflect the nature of this nation, we are now 'one and free.' But this change rather than settling the issue creates even more questions, because quite clearly we are not. While we are thinking about our anthem, the question of change could have been resolved by simply adopting the verses written by Dr Robin Sharwood which are used in St Paul's Cathedral Melbourne, one of the verses is:

O God, who made this ancient land,  
And set it round with sea,  
Sustain us all who dwell herein,  
One people strong and free.  
Grant we may guard its generous gifts,  
Its beauty rich and rare.  
In your great name, may we proclaim,  
'Advance, Australia fair!'  
With thankful hearts then let us sing,  
'Advance Australia, fair!'

But of course it mentions God which would be problematic for some and it still doesn't resolve the issue of our unity which is clearly easy to sing about but much more difficult to attain. We are probably like Jonah we don't really want to speak out, we scarcely believe that we can effect change, and we feel that our voices will be largely ignored anyway. But it is at the heart of our vocation to repent, to seek renewal and drive the call for unity...now.

It begins, like all our missionary endeavours from here; and from here into lives lived out penitentially, prayerfully, eucharistically. Our rites are communal rites, they bind us together. Our penitential rites are a communal call repentance. Merciful God, our maker and our judge, **we** have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, **we** have not loved you; **we** have not loved our neighbours; **we** repent, and are sorry. Father, forgive **us**. Strengthen **us** to love and obey you in **newness...**

The fact is that we are finite creatures, many of our so called sins are a direct result of our limitations. I recall reeling off a list of failings to my confessor once, he looked at me over his glasses, sighed deeply and said welcome to the human race, my boy! Most of our faults are communal and we bring them to God, and when we have been absolved, we say Kyrie eleison, Christe eleison, Kyrie eleison, a plea for God to come to our aid (the literal meaning of eleison). We confess our being caught up, possessed by the cussedness of life and society.

However unfortunately the Church continues to be involved in matters of personal morality, sin has become individualised, that's not to say that we don't bring these things to God too, when our consciences are tender. But we as a Church expend a great deal of energy in such matters, ultimately they may (will) divide us and until we can move beyond this we will struggle to have a voice in the issues of our day.

Send **us** out in power of your spirit to live and work to your praise and glory. This is our call and when as a Church we can live and work to God's praise and glory we will speak with a unified voice that will drive renewal and repentance and unity and give a voice to the marginalised, I pray that we may continue to work unstintingly for such unity as Christ himself called us, that world may believe. Amen.