

Redefinition

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost—3 September 2017
Revd Martin Johnson

Exodus 3.1-15; Psalm 105.1-6, 23-26; Romans 12.9-21; Matthew 16.21-28

Our media are dominated at present by the issue of the Marriage Act. It is the subject of endless columns, TV advertisements and indeed, no doubt, sermons! Much ink has been spilt and air time used over whether there should be a redefinition of the nature of marriage.

The business of 'redefinition' is inherently part of our tradition. It is writ large in our scriptures, both old and new. The story of Moses and the burning bush provides us with a redefinition of the nature of God. It is a redefinition found first in God's self-description, which has been the source of fascination since time immemorial. 'Who shall I say sent me?' asks Moses; 'I am who I am' responds the voice from the bush. There is almost a sense of 'None of your business' in this reply, or perhaps 'You cannot control me by invoking my name.' Another popular translation has been 'I am who causes things to be'—in other words, 'I am the creator'. The oldest is possibly 'I am who am,' perhaps meaning 'I exist and everything else exists because of me!' A more contemporary take on God's self-description is 'I will be there with you.'

Whatever translation we favour, this name for God has become so sacred that Jews to this day never say the name of God. When they come across the word *YHWH* in the scriptures they replace it with *Adonai*—Lord or *ha shem*—the name. It lacks vowels which makes it unpronounceable and it is difficult to know what is missing, particularly given that *YHWH* is a verb form; God is a doing word. This is a major redefinition of the nature of God. It is the beginning of the idea that God is indeed 'with us' and it is the beginning of our Biblical narrative in the story of Moses and the Exodus.

Jesus, in his life, was involved in significant acts of redefinition. Among the first public words of Jesus are those spoken in the synagogue after reading from the prophet Isaiah—'the Spirit of the Lord is upon me.' He sits down and proclaims to the gathering, 'today these words have been fulfilled in your sight'; we can only imagine the reaction. In today's gospel, we experience Jesus speaking to his disciples, and Peter in particular, of the redefinition of Messiahship. 'From that time on' Jesus spoke of this destiny as the Messiah. To be truly messianic he must enter into the pain and suffering of the world. This was not the traditional idea of messiahship: no politics, no military, no insurgency.

The most significant act of redefinition is that which we will celebrate this morning. The Passover meal was to become the 'Last Supper' and Jesus was to be the Passover Lamb of God. Again, we can only begin to imagine what the disciples felt at the conclusion of that meal as they sung a hymn and then went to the Mount of Olives, to Gethsemane, and the arrest of Jesus, at which point there was betrayal and denial.

Much of the debate regarding changes to the Marriage Act concerns rights, equality, fairness—good things in themselves. Yet, while Jesus did endeavour to redefine his religion and the nature of God, he didn't do so for those reasons. What we mustn't lose sight of is that the redefinitions in our tradition came at a cost. Moses's leading of his people was not without cost. He never saw the land promised to his people. Jesus tells us we must take up our crosses; he reminds us that his coming does not bring peace but division; he tells his disciples that they will be hated. This is not the stuff of human rights, fairness and equality.

Brave New World by Aldous Huxley is a modern literary classic; some of you may have had to read it at school. In this novel, set in the future, the state has become all powerful. It controls

reproduction, genetic engineering is the norm, and the masses are kept in ignorant bliss by a drug called 'soma'. Only one character in Huxley's novel, the Savage, is recognisably human and he claims the right to be unhappy. At the end of *Brave New World*, the rebel, John the Savage, confronts the Controller. 'Universal happiness', the Controller admits, 'has been achieved by shifting the emphasis away from truth and beauty, and towards comfort. Art and science have become impossible because they require challenge, skill and frustration. Happiness has got to be paid for somehow and a guarantee of comfort requires losing other experiences that are part of being human.'

Jesus does not want us to be unhappy. But he does want us to lead real, authentic, lives. What he wants is for us to live together in new and radical ways. It is the way of God, the way of the divine, the Father and I are one; *but it is also the way of the cross*. 'You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.' Peter's reaction is a selfish one: *I want to be happy*. Jesus knows that it is only through his self-giving and death—and resurrection—that we can experience the relationships to which we have been called in their fullest.

Whatever our views may be—and the church, like society, is divided on this issue—we must ensure that we all bear something of the cost, the pain, involved in the debate. Listening intently to the other, is costly and sometimes painful but it is our vocation. From this time on in Matthew's gospel, the shadow of the cross looms ever larger. It is a reminder to us of the nature of the God that we serve and worship. The God that was redefined in the person and the act of Christ crucified.

Perhaps our reading from St Paul this morning (Romans 12:9-21) could be something of a mantra as we debate and listen and seek God's will for God's people. Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour.

Amen.