

The tasks that are before us

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

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Sunday 5th December 2004, Second Sunday in Advent

Isaiah 11:1-10; Psalm 72:1-7, 18-21; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12

John came preaching a Baptism of Repentance; and he comes proclaiming *his* message with a word of judgement.

He lashes out... "you brood of vipers!" He seeks repentance from his hearers and speaks of one coming after him who will clear the threshing floor who will gather in the wheat and burn the chaff!

A terrifying man, proclaiming even more terror to come. A man finding his home in the wilds; eating whatever he could find; wild eyed, angry, compelling.

and the one who comes after him? The one for whose coming we are preparing this Advent?

He walks, from town to town, wanders around the sea at Galilee and focuses his gaze on the city, on Jerusalem.

His time in the wilderness lasted 40 days.

It was enough.

He returned from there to sit with, tax collectors, sinners... he gathered people around him.

Not the fearful, compelling, strident voice of the Baptist.

Something different had happened.

John came preaching a Baptism of Repentance!

The point about repentance is that *forgiveness* is offered. And with forgiveness comes a chance for a new life... for a whole life.

If there is no forgiveness, then life is caught, enmeshed, restricted to what has been — there is no hope for a fuller life, for a brighter future; the past holds us, and the future is determined.

God's offer of forgiveness *enables* life. It liberates and allows life to go on, to hope for a better future, to face the future whatever it holds...

We cannot repent of what we **are**.

female or male, lesbian or heterosexual, Australian, Kenyan or Fijian,

Thank God for that, we can rejoice in the diversity of our humanity!

We repent of what we have done, or left undone.

Yes, we need a God who will thunder out what we need to be doing. Especially a god who will tell the rulers of the world, the powerful of the world what *they* need to do... (well, it sounds good anyway...)

But we also need a god who will come and sit with us, who will be one of us and tell us

it is alright, really, quite OK,

to be HUMAN...

and that "yes" to us is heard most loudly in a tiny baby in a crib in a manger.

But, having heard the 'yes', then there is work to be done!

In today's readings:

Isaiah has this wondrous vision of a Kingdom ruled with justice — a kingdom ruled by one who has come out of the 'stump of Jesse'. A descendant of Jesse, a descendant of David. Isaiah is looking at a kingdom in ruins, but seeing hope of a better future...

The psalm praying for a king, (perhaps at his enthronement), prays that he might rule with righteousness and justice.

Paul, in Romans, widens out the message that we hear today in Isaiah and the psalms to include the Gentiles.

One thing which shocked me when I realised it, was that there is no blueprint for the way a government is organised.

Monarchy or republic, liberal democracy or whatever else... governments have the task of ensuring justice for their people and peace. (I don't know about theocracies!)

The work of government is a human work. However we organise ourselves, it is our task.

With all of these texts in mind, I prepared by delving into St Mark's library. I thank the parish council for maintaining our parish membership! It is a real boon to be able to register and borrow as a parishioner!

I was actually burrowing into the book stacks to get material for the Advent Calendar. (wave) I had chosen passages from Isaiah that were from the lectionary readings of the day and now wanted some extra bits. Last week's Calendar is printed and available in the foyer...

In the delving I discovered The Barmen Declaration. This is a statement made in 1934 by the The Confessing Synod of the German Evangelical Church. At that time in Germany it was essential for the church to have a theological understanding of the relationship between church and state.

Faced with Hitler and the National Socialists, the church had caved in and swallowed the myths and placed the swastika on the cross. The Barmen Declaration, and the Confessing church, was an attempt to retrieve the gospel from that captivity.

They needed to clearly state what the state of the church is...

The church has the task of proclamation of the gospel and especially proclaiming forgiveness of sins. Fred's Mum, Rose, says of church "We've been and had our sins forgiven!" (I wonder if her very evangelical brother Charlie has something to do with that phrase.)

But that task of proclaiming forgiveness is a task of liberation. It is only by liberating life that the gospel can lay claim to our whole life.

In the book (Jungel p34)

"This distinguishes Jesus Christ - as he claims our whole life - from all totalitarian demands, among which the moralistic demand is probably the basic model of a

totalitarian claim on human life. None of these totalitarian demands liberate life. Rather they violate it because they lay claim to our whole life without being able to make it whole."

And a whole, healed life can approach the task of doing justice!

We must do that task!

In today's comments from the Christmas Bowl comes a disturbing story from the Philippines. A family killed by overzealous troops pursuing terrorists. The War against Terrorism has many innocent victims.

From the Sudan, dreadful stories of death as people flee.

[Rob has these stories in the newsletter for today.]

In Australia today, Baxter still is a place of unjust incarceration. There have been seven suicide attempts in the last few weeks. Governments may have the task of ensuring justice, but we need to recognise our own power and complicity in that work as well.

Desmond Tutu has written:

" we are called to be actively involved in levelling up the playing field. And this ministry is not just to those near at hand. It is particularly to those ... who lack most, who are at the bottom of the heap, for whom there seems to be no justice at all. "

..."But justice is not a case of the 'haves' giving to the 'have nots'. That is far too unworthy and shallow an interpretation of God's intent for us. We must recognise that all people are our brothers and sisters in Christ, we are all members of God's family. We would want the best for our family. We would want good education and health care for them and we would willingly help in any way possible for this to happen. If they are being victimised and oppressed we would move heaven and earth to speak out against such evil. If dictators do not respect their rights, we will not stand by and say it is not our business. It is our business to be where there is pain and suffering and to oppose injustice with all our strength. Our brothers and sisters are in trouble and we cannot enjoy peace of mind and make peace with God if we do nothing. It is our responsibility as part of being God's children to actively try to make God's Kingdom come on earth...."

As we work and wait for the coming of God's Kingdom, let us in hope look forward to Christmas and that celebration, and face the tasks that are before us, bringing justice and peace and hope to the world.

God of hope come: hear the cries of your people and have mercy on us.

Amen.

References and further texts:

Eberhard Jungel. *Christ, Justice and Peace: Toward a Theology of the State in Dialogue with the Barmen Declaration* Translated by D Bruce Hamill and Alan J Torrance with an introductory Essay by Alan J Torrance, T&T Clark, Edinburgh 1992

Desmond Tutu's words: http://www.pulpit.org/articles/the_best_for_our_family.asp