

Twenty second Sunday after Pentecost 2017

'Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime, therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we must be saved by love.' These are words of Reinhold Niebuhr, the great American theologian, ethicist, political commentator and Christian minister.

Last week we heard of the end of Moses. We were told he was 120 years old, his sight was unimpaired and his vigour had not abated, and yet he did see the completion of his great mission. He brought the people out of Egypt but was only given a chance to glimpse the Promised Land, he never set foot in it. God's great project was not achieved in his lifetime. One of great insights of the Hebrew people is that accomplishment is intergenerational; today we hear of Joshua upon whom the mantle has now been placed, it is he who will bring the people across the Jordan into the land promised to Abraham and his descendants.

I want to gather a few threads together today that reflect a number of issues that are in my thoughts. We are at present commemorating a number of events that took place one hundred years ago. This past week has seen us remember the charge of the Australian Light Horse Brigade at Beersheba, the last cavalry charge in military history. On Saturday next we will again mark Remembrance Day and recall the day and the hour when, at last, the guns fell silent on the Western Front.

The history of theological thought has many giants but there are two that stood astride the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The first was Friedrich Schleiermacher, a scholar who is often described as the father of liberal theological thought. Schleiermacher endeavoured to bring together the ideas of the enlightenment with those of theology. It was an uncomfortable fit, it still is to some extent. The people of his day were increasingly looking to science, medicine and development of humanity; this thinking prevailed throughout much of the 1800s as people wrestled with 'modern' thinking. There was Darwin of course, numerous philosophers, the French Revolution, the industrial revolution and the ideas of modern Biblical criticism. Many found in these ideas a bright future; this modern thinking would be the salvation of humanity.

As the twentieth century dawned another theological great came to the fore his name was Karl Barth. For Barth these modern ideas had been torn apart, found totally wanting by the mass destruction of mechanized warfare. His theology was influenced greatly by the events of the Great War. How could it be that humanity could turn on itself with such catastrophic consequences? What of the optimism of enlightenment thinking? Barth challenged the prevailing liberal thought, our faith in humanity has been misplaced, we must turn back to God; his famous mantra: 'you can't talk about God by speaking

of humanity in a loud voice!' The events of the Great War One hundred years ago caused a significant theological shift.

Reinhold Niebuhr was a Barthian and we can see that in his writings: Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime, therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we must be saved by love. He speaks of the three theological virtues faith, hope and love. Without them, we, humanity can achieve nothing of any note. Jesus in Matthew's gospel warns against placing our hope in human teachers and leaders, listen to them he says for they speak words of wisdom but don't do as do. Be wary of calling people Father or Rabbi do not place people on pedestals, they will disappoint. As the psalmist warned do not place your trust in princes!

The problem is that we want to see things done, we want to see things happening, we want to see results. Naturally then we turn to science, we do turn to the experts, we do want to engage in our form of activism, we busy ourselves. None of these things are bad in themselves, this is the very nature of our incarnational faith. However there must be more. There is no salvation in science, knowledge, activism, alone and quite often, like Moses, we will not see the fruits of our labours.

It is true that of the theological virtues faith, hope and love, Paul tells us that the greatest is love, we called to do something. But that something must be done in the context of faith and hope. We could say that our Christian identity is marked by the order in which we do things, faith, hope and love; believing, trusting and doing. I am fond of quoting Kierkegaard the Lutheran Dane who famously was very fond of the Letter of James, despite Luther calling it an epistle of straw. He wrote: 'Christianity requires everything of you, but when you have accomplished everything it requires, all the same, that you realize you have been saved by grace alone and nothing else.' I think that is a wonderful way of understanding the theology of work.

Our Christian ethic is indeed to do things, the greatest of these is love; but we do in a particular context. Our doing, our loving is something we do in the here and now it is modern by its very context, however is informed by the past, by an understanding of how the life of God has been understood and shared from the very beginning and importantly open to the future which is in God's hands.

Reinhold Niebuhr is credited with having written the serenity prayer. It has been altered over the years but initially he wrote "Father, give us courage to change what must be altered, serenity to accept what cannot be helped, and the insight to know the one from the other." That requires of us faith and hope and love. Believing, trusting, doing; they are the marks of human, Christian life. Amen.