

What is St Philip's Here For?

Sermon for Advent 3, Year C, 16 December 2018

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor, ACT, Australia

The Revd Canon Prof Scott Cowdell

Zephaniah 3: 14-20; Song of Isaiah (12: 2-6); Philippians 4: 4-7; Luke 3: 7-18

+In the Name of God: Father, Son & Holy Spirit. AMEN.

In today's gospel our God takes on the Roman Empire, and its nest of local collaborators, and a whole population imaginatively defeated by Rome's culture of violent fatalism. John the Baptist lets fly, leaving no doubt that God has a much better life on offer for his hearers if they'll only open their hearts to the possibility. No good asserting privilege and refusing to listen, like those who claimed Abraham for their father and saw themselves as a cut above, as safe from the prophetic eye. John makes short work of them: their pretensions are of precisely equal worth to the stones and gravel lying about, as far as God's concerned. Then, in response to genuine questions from hearers who might be intrigued about the possibility of things being different, John starts to lay it out.

But we can't reduce John's message to moral exhortation, or to a call for social justice. Instead, the prophet is in the imagination business,

inviting us to see ourselves and our world differently, with fresh eyes. So instead of simply insisting on fair distribution of food and clothing, the deeper challenge is to see ourselves in solidarity with others, as not threatened by others, so that sharing becomes something natural and obvious, not something that still leaves us feeling reluctant. Instead of corrupt practices, Rome's local tax collectors should stop seeing themselves as hated outsiders getting their own back and start seeing themselves as a responsible part of society, as insiders with a role not outsiders with a grievance. And instead of thugs and extortionists, Rome's soldiers are invited to regard themselves in a more dignified light, not mercenaries preying on the population but disciplined men performing an honourable service.

John the Baptist goes on to place all this in the context of God's dream for Israel and Judah, and for the whole world, pointing forward to the coming of God's Messiah and the righting of every wrong. In light of this hope, God's people can imagine differently, and regard their circumstances differently, and assess others in less adversarial terms, and so begin to live differently. Friends, this is the way in which Christian ethical life emerges, beginning with a transformed imagination.

St Paul unpacks this for us in our Epistle today, in words set so beautifully to music by Henry Purcell: “Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say, rejoice”. This joy is at the heart of Christian imagination, and Paul goes on with the exhortation “be careful for nothing” — move beyond anxiety, and let God worry about our needs. Because, friends, we’re being wound up constantly these days by an anxious government, by frustrated ideologues on the political right, while others are feeling anxious about losing many traditional bearings in our social life thanks to libertarian ideologues on the political left.

But anxiety is good for business. It keeps us restlessly purchasing, to fill the latest void, so that anxiety helps fuel a growth economy. It’s also good for stoking self-defining political exclusions, like keeping the asylum seeker children out of Australia at all costs because the roof would fall in if they started finding their way here, and if demonising started giving way to compassion. Friends, all this anxiety has led to an uneasy peace that reigns in our country, but also in Brexit-convulsed Britain, and in the reality television freak show of Whitehouse politics. It’s a world where everyone is watching their back and seeing who’s the next to go under.

Instead, friends, Paul commends something altogether different: the peace of God which passes all understanding. This alternative becomes possible for us when our imagination yields to the good

news, to the calming and reorienting discipline of prayer, and to the habits of thankfulness that take us to the heart of what Eucharist means. We can venture this imaginative shift because God reassures us about our security, about our being shame-proof, and about our still having something worthwhile to hold up in front of the nations, as Zechariah reminds God's people this morning. We can venture this imaginative shift, as the Song of Isaiah reminds us this morning, because God places a well of salvation in our midst, because we belong to a village where there's no shortage of living water.

Friends, the Christian life is about imaginative transformation and its outworking in a whole different approach to who we are, to our relationships, to relieving others from the burden of our rivalry, and to being made new by God. All this happens locally, but the impact is global.

And where does it happen locally? Where is that well of salvation? Friends, it's here in the praise of God, in the joy of the gospel, in the fellowship of Christ and his people, in the Eucharist, and in the parish life that has been growing up around all this for 2000 years. Our story at St Philip's isn't 60 years old yet, but it's still a story of imaginations transformed, of hearts set free, of lives shaped from youth to age in quiet fruitfulness, of worthy dreams embraced and misapprehensions put aside. As we mark today's parish

commemoration, we remember what this is all for: for shaping people who know the peace of God which passes all understanding.

Because it's people like this, people like us, who won't fall into the more usual habits of self-justification, corruption and violence that make the world go round, and whose imaginations won't remain imprisoned by a stubborn fatalism. Remember, Christianity in its early days constituted an imaginative revolution that overcame the Roman Empire, and we've still got some fight left in us yet. This is our Advent hope, and this is what St Philip's is for.

The Lord be with you ...