

Nothing Need Ever be the Same

Sermon for the 6th Sunday after Epiphany, Year C, 17 February 2019

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

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Jeremiah 17: 5-10; Psalm 1; 1 Corinthians 15: 12-20; Luke 6: 17-26

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

“I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions”—so writes Annie Dillard. “Does anyone have the foggiest idea of what sort of power we so blithely invoke?” she asks. “Or, as I suspect,” she continues,

does no one believe a word of it? ... It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offence, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.ⁱ

If Annie Dillard's view of what we're doing here in church seems fanciful; if her challenge to any half-heartedness in worship, and in Christian living, seems a bit over the top, then the message of today's Gospel and our other readings will sound over the top as well.

Paul tells us today that resurrection is the opposite of lifeless habit, the opposite of religion as a tame part of life, the opposite of 'making the best of what there is in life and that's the end of it', or whatever other 'plain man's creed' we may have fallen into believing. Resurrection is the opposite of the fatalistic and resigned lives that many people live, in the Church as well as out. "If for this life only we have hoped in Christ", Paul tells us today, "we are of all people most to be pitied". How might this strong conviction of Paul apply to our Christian experience today?

I think it speaks to a common experience among Christians in the mainstream Churches: to what we might call the powerless Christian life, the resigned Christian life. It points to a life drawing vague reassurance from worship habits and pious beliefs, perhaps, but a life that lacks faith, that lacks confidence, that lacks boldness; a life for which God, who raised Jesus from the dead, has no surprises left in store.

Paul's message, on the other hand, is that God in raising Jesus Christ has turned the whole world upside down. The resurrection means that all bets are off. It reassures Christians that things need not be as they are, *because the power that raised Jesus from the dead is now on the loose*, changing things that seem inevitable, uprooting all of life's leaden inevitabilities that seem so firmly set in concrete. What am I talking about?

A good example is our own disappointments and setbacks in life. Jeremiah is onto this this morning, as is the Psalmist. "Blessed are those who trust in the LORD, whose trust *is* the LORD", says Jeremiah. "They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes...". This is a power that many of us will recognize in our own experience: the power to find strength in times of trouble, perspective and courage in times of perplexity, and the vigour to bounce back large as life after we're knocked down. This is God at work for us, says Jeremiah. More pointed is our Psalm today, about those who know and obey the Lord, who can be relied upon to bear fruit in due season, who will not wither—whose staying-power outstrips that of people who don't know God and acknowledge God in their lives.

The resurrection of Jesus is the central Christian celebration of this reality. It declares that God has turned the tables. Today's Gospel spells this out. Jesus talks to his disciples in front of a whole crowd of suffering, yearning humanity, and he tells them that the tide of cosmic history has turned. No longer need it be the case that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, while a world of violence and bullying and exclusion goes unchallenged. In Jesus' ministry and all the prophets, but especially in raising and vindicating the dead Jesus, God lifts up and vindicates the victims of history, those who Frantz Fanon called 'the wretched of the earth'. So thanks to our resurrection faith in Jesus Christ, why not believe that the poor can inherit the kingdom, and the weeping have the cause of their bitterness removed; why not believe that the winter of corruption and cynicism and programmatic indifference in high places is passing? Perhaps Luke's revolutionary virgin was right, when she sang about Jesus' coming, that 'God has put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted the humble and meek'. All those in suffering solidarity with the crucified Jesus can look up—all the dead among whom he first descended, all the living among whom and on whose account he suffered.

Dare we believe that God in Jesus Christ has unleashed a new creation, bursting out in the midst of the old one? Dare we believe that in baptism and Eucharist we die to the old world and begin our life in a new one? Because if we do believe this, then we'll find our lives changing. We'll find ourselves siding with the powerless, the defeated, the hopeless. Through private and community action, through support of Government policy when it works in tune with the risen Christ, and by opposing it when it doesn't, we'll show that we prefer the resurrection version of reality over the fatalist version many of us were brought up to respect and fit our lives around.

We'll also find ourselves in strife, as Jesus did. The bullies don't like being put on notice. So when Luke's Jesus declares blessed those who are excluded, reviled and defamed on account of the son of man, he points to the actual price of Christian discipleship. It will put us on a collision course with the powers that be—in the world and, yes, in the Church, too. But so be it. Solidarity with Jesus in his liberating mission means solidarity in struggle, but also solidarity in joy: "Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven".

We gather here weekly for the Eucharist to celebrate this vision and reclaim our place in it. We come to sense in our own

bodies an urgent desire for things to be different, and a subversive hope. If we trust this instinct, we will *not* be content with business as usual. No, life is breaking out, friends, in every Eucharist. And caught up in this life we leave this place well equipped with hope, and with *attitude*. Nothing need ever be the same again—thanks to Jesus, crucified and risen. Nothing!

The Lord be with you...

ⁱ Annie Dillard, 'Expedition to the Pole' in *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 40-41.