

Making a highway in the wilderness

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
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Isaiah 40.1-11, Psalm 85.1-2, 8-13, 2 Peter 3.8-15a, Mark 1.1-8

How many of you know the freeway between Sydney and Newcastle? How many of you remember what the journey was like before the freeway was built? I barely remember the old Pacific Highway but my parents would tell us tales of driving on the highway in my father's light 15 Citroen, weaving their way around the sandstone hills and across the Hawkesbury. Work on the new freeway began in 1963, the year I was born, but it was not until 1968 that the massive bridge across the Hawkesbury was built. I still remember my father telling me that he made the girders for that bridge. We used to travel from Newcastle to Sydney quite a lot as my parents had family in that part of the world. I have vivid memories of watching the road change over the many years from a little windy road into the massive four-lane extravagance we have today. Through those years I saw the machinery that came and leveled mountains and hauled away tones of sandstone. I was enthralled with the massive cuttings that dwarfed our little cortina as we speed along. To my young eyes it was amazing—amazing that human beings could make straight a pathway that had been daunting, dangerous and slow. I am still amazed by it—a highway in the wilderness, well what seemed like a wilderness at the time. I am amazed by the ingenuity that prepared and constructed that highway.

I am intrigued by the notion of a highway that is mentioned in the Isaiah reading. A heavenly voice, a prophet, announces, “make straight in the desert a highway for our God”. Previously in Isaiah 33 the prophet laments the state of the country and peoples actions. He says, *“Listen! the valiant cry in the streets; the envoys of peace weep bitterly. ⁸The highways are deserted, travelers have quit the road. The treaty is broken, its oaths are despised, its obligation is disregarded. ⁹The land mourns and languishes.”*

A highway in the time of Isaiah was the major link between cities and communities. Having a safe highway was critical and there were clauses in treaties between kingdoms and places would ensure safe travel. Yet Isaiah points out that the highways are deserted and that travelers have quit the road for fear of their lives. The people have broken their word and those that work for peace are in mourning. People have abandoned the way of peace. They have abandoned the way of justice.

But then in our reading today Isaiah declares that God is coming; he is about to lead a new Exodus through the wilderness to a blessed land bringing redemption and restoration. In Advent we prepare for the coming of the Lord, the coming that has happened will happen and is happening right now. We prepare for this redemption and restoration. Last week I spoke about the need to be humbly attentive to the signs that God is coming and to keep awake and ready. Today we are urged to make the path straight.

The earliest Christians were called people of the way and part of their calling and ours is to prepare the way of Jesus both in our own hearts and lives and in the world around us. Preparing a highway in the wilderness of our hearts and the world around us seems to me a daunting task. When I think about the freeway between Sydney and Newcastle, it was a mammoth task to make the ways straight and true. How do we proclaim the way of Christ to a world that has stopped listening? How do we excavate the great rocky depths of our own hearts?

I think we have to start with the second question first—ourselves. If we have not looked within, changed our way of being and grown in our faith and life in the Spirit, we will have nothing to say to anyone else. The conversation is over before it has begun. It is no longer the case that others will listen to us because we stand on a platform of church membership. It is no longer the case that our advanced age will ensure the young will pay us any attention. What matters is integrity—that we are what we preach and proclaim. So I wonder what it is that gets in the way of us having this integrity? What is it that gets in the way of you and I looking and acting like we are redeemed and restored?

When workmen began to construct that toll way back in 1963 they had to clear the mountains. They had to move rocks, dirt and plants. They had to literally shift a mountain of stuff. What stuff is lying deep within you that needs to be excavated and done away with? Is it fear? Is it resentment about a past situation or event that still sits in your heart? Is it guilt or shame about past mistakes and wrongs? Is it a feeling of worthlessness, of not being good enough? Is it that you feel hurt and wounded by what someone has said and or done? Is it avoidance behaviours? Or is it just plain sins of commission—you know greed, envy, lust, wrath, gluttony, pride or sloth? That was seven in case you were not counting!

The great joy and beauty of the good news of Jesus is that he has come to us, and will come to us. We are loved and chosen. We may fall out of fellowship temporarily but not out of love, and when we do God will come and get us. So we are secure. We are so secure we can let go of our baggage and turn and face God, convinced of our place in his heart. I think half of our trouble is that we do not really believe this. We find it so hard to trust this unconditional love.

There is a confusing element in all of this as well. It could be taken that we have to build the way of the Lord by being morally good, that somehow whether God comes or not depends on our efforts, as if we could magically conjure God up by good deeds and faithful living. Instead the good news says that God is already here and is leading us onwards. What we need to do is clear the highways of our own hearts so we can discern his call and presence. Walking in his pathways, free and true, is our obedient response to God's grace. It is not a matter of clearing the highways so that the Lord can arrive unencumbered. It is about clearing the paths so we can see Jesus ahead of us, leading us on into that kingdom land of healing and wholeness. I was intrigued to read just recently about Lancelot Andrewes, Dean of Westminster Cathedral and one of the translators of the King James Bible. He would spend at least 5 hours every morning in prayer and he remarked that if someone called on him before midday they clearly did not believe in God. Andrewes certainly cleared the way so he could see God and the King James Bible is a testament to that discipline.

Our other job as followers of the Lord is to keep the pathways clear so that others may see Jesus. In the parish we have been speaking about evangelism. Evangelism is not about getting more people into the church. It is about helping people see Jesus and respond to his call in their lives. If we are selling the church I can tell you we will fail. The church is only a means to an end and that end is Christ himself. Our liturgy, our music, our prayers, our life together, our outreach, our meetings and all the rest of it have one ultimate goal—the way of Jesus Christ for all people.

Just as each of us need to look into our own hearts and do some excavating and offloading of those things that are getting in the way of seeing God and knowing his love in our lives maybe as a parish we need to consider those things that are getting in the way of us, as a community, showing Christ to others. Is it attachment to the things of the past? Is it fear? Is it a sense of hopelessness? I wonder—are we revealing Jesus or are we revealing our own attachments and wants?

I know we could and do make the argument that by our loving deeds we are revealing Christ. We can indeed take heart that when we show genuine love we are revealing God because God is love. However, what truly brings healing and wholeness and radical transformation is Jesus Christ and his way and knowing his way. Time and time again that was what I discerned when I was doing my research in the Philippines. What made the biggest difference in the communities in which David and I spent time was the person who had the deepest relationship to God through Jesus Christ. It was not a matter of “I am saved so listen to me”, it was instead a humble gratitude and thankfulness for Christ and his redemption. It was a sense of hope and possibility. It was a strong conviction that the response to the love Jesus showed was to make known that same love through words and deeds in the community.

We will shortly join together in celebrating the last time that Jesus shared food and wine with his disciples. The Eucharistic prayer is always about the central aspect of our faith, Jesus Christ, and his death and resurrection. In the communion we do our best to bring Christ to the front and centre of our hearts and minds. The prayers and readings, the confession and silences are how we build that highway, how we open up the way, that then allows us to see God more clearly. May what we do here in church be how we live every moment of every day. Amen.