

No Season for Hard Men

Sermon for Advent 3, Year A, 15 December 2019

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

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Isaiah 35: 1-10; Psalm 146; James 5: 7-10; Matthew 11: 2-11

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

Don't we love a strong, prophetic voice standing up in public for what we believe in? And doesn't whoever's in power who we resent hate to be called out by these prophetic voices? Many on the left would love to pin a target on the likes of Alan Jones, Ray Hadley and Rupert Murdoch's stable of ideological drones, not to mention the right's court philosopher Jordan Peterson. Meanwhile, President Trump is angry with Greta Thunberg, though he's more than a bit obsessed with her, too, as King Herod was with John the Baptist. As for our own national leaders, free speech and religious freedom remain top priority for them as they peer through the smoke, though of course critical voices and especially critical religious voices raised against them and their priorities are strangely unwelcome.

Friends, we live at a time when the hard men are taking over, and it's only going to get worse. When the rivers dry up, when the agriculture starts to fail, and economies with it; when the coasts are inundated, and when hundreds of millions of climate refugees start pressing themselves on this gated community that the West is becoming; whose voices will predominate? It will increasingly be those of the hard men—or the hard women, if Emma Thompson's monstrous UK prime minister Vivienne Rook is any indication, from the excellent current drama series *Years and Years*. What's more, the predominance of hard heads and hard hearts at the top leads to their critics getting harder, too, so that the problem ratchets up. A sense of crisis breeds these pathologies. Today's gospel takes us to an earlier instance of the same problem, and shows us Jesus' response to it.

The problem is that John the Baptist was becoming too much of a hard man—John the Baptist whose movement drew the young Jesus to it, and who's baptism Jesus had sought. Now we see John the Baptist seriously worried that he might have recruited the wrong man, wondering whether Jesus has what it takes to carry the torch in what John saw as a fire and brimstone crusade: “When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another.’” (Matt 11: 2-3). How extraordinary, really, when you think

about it: to be disappointed with Jesus because he's not uncompromising enough in his teaching and practice? What Jesus does, in his equally extraordinary response to this challenge, is to be doubly uncompromising, though in a new and unexpected direction.

Jesus sends back an unmistakably Old Testament message to John the Baptist, but not one that he would have expected—a message that we heard from Isaiah in our first reading today, and echoed by our psalm; a message about what the Lord's coming will actually involve: not the fire and brimstone of harsh judgement for the undeserving, which John the Baptist expected and many so-called Christians are still enthusiastic about, but sight for the blind, relief for the crippled, cleansing and reintegration for the excluded lepers, and good news at last for the poor who are dying for some. New life, new hope, new beginnings, in keeping with what the God of Israel's covenant most truly has in store.

Now, what about the crowd of disaffected who'd come out to hear John the Baptist and who no doubt loved it when he stuck it to the man? Jesus cleverly plays to this crowd with his opening remarks in today's Gospel, before suddenly turning the tables. Yes of course we all know that John the Baptist is a hard man, Jesus tells them; we know that he's a no-nonsense tough talker. John's no reed bending in the wind, Jesus affirms—John isn't nervously counting Facebook

likes and adapting his message accordingly. John's no staffer with soft hands and no-real world experience, Jesus adds, tucked safely away in the Canberra bubble. Yes, he is a prophet, Jesus declares, as the crowd no doubt warms to the message and starts waving placards. But John isn't *just* a prophet, Jesus goes on, in an age long deprived of prophets, as that age regarded itself. No, John is *the* prophet, the final prophet, the new Elijah, the one who would herald the great Advent of Israel's Messiah. But then Jesus executes his remarkable bait and switch: "Truly I tell you, among those born of woman no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he." (Matt 11: 11)

Jesus' message to the crowd, as to the disciples of his one-time role model John the Baptist, is that what's coming is different from what the hard men of this world expect and crave. It's good news, not bad news; it's restorative justice that works, not retributive justice that just deepens the cycles of violence and alienation; it's new chances, new capacities, new freedoms—not the old freedoms stridently proclaimed but never truly realised or felt.

And there's nothing soft about any of this. Jesus' kingdom comes at a price, as we hear in the prologue of John's Gospel on Christmas morning and in the Gospel passion narratives at Easter. And the resurrection is more disruptive still, unleashing an unstoppable force

of love revealing just how wrong the hard men are about God's future for the world.

So, friends, that's how it's to be with Jesus in a world increasingly in love with tough talk and hard men to deliver it. And this doesn't mean bleeding heart liberalism. Rather, it's a tough-minded compassion more robust than every simplistic non-solution on offer from the hard men. And it's certainly not pandering to the disaffected. Rather, it's summoning humanity along the only path that leads to true change.

Now, a final word about the Church and how it's to conduct itself in support of Jesus' vision, following our second reading this morning from the letter of James. Here Christians are called to wait patiently, and not to be consumed by the anxiety that leads to grumbling against one another. What God doesn't want from us, and what the world doesn't need, is a Church caught up in the rhetoric of these hard men, repeating in our Church's life the culture wars that increasingly shape the whole Western world. Yet this very failure is what we see in our own national Church, as an unremittingly hard line on human sexuality serves to unite the uneasy and irritable forces of conservative Anglicanism, and of course not only here but internationally, too. Those who love to quote the Bible against their opponents need to heed the Bible's call for a patient and mutually

forbearing Church—a call that we hear from James today and from every other voice in our New Testament.

So, friends, Jesus affirms the greatness of this prophet John the Baptist, while gently but firmly reminding him, and us, that urgency and critical insight lead us most truly in the direction of clear-headed compassion, not angry, wilful and unintelligent harshness. If we're going to be heard-headed, let's get it right, and be hard-headed about the loving vision of God's kingdom. And it's this no-nonsense reality that summons us in our Eucharist this morning.

The Lord be with you ...