

Real Religious Freedom

Sermon for the 13th Sunday after Pentecost, Year C, 8 September 2019

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

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Deuteronomy 30: 15-20; Psalm 1; Philemon; Luke 14: 25-33

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

We live at a time of increasing political populism, with the crowd being pandered to in all sorts of ways. But Jesus is no populist leader, giving the mob what it wants—which typically involves someone or some group losing out in a big way. Instead, in the face of a clamouring crowd in today's Gospel, Jesus rejects every popular sentiment, every conventional piety, in an intentionally confronting way: be prepared to hate, or at least to forsake, the members of your family; prepare to lose your life if necessary as his follower; and if you're not prepared to do that, to find that level of resolute detachment and unconventionality, then you won't readily be able to follow him and you may fail spectacularly in the attempt, like a careless builder or a reckless general.

We also live at a time when America's culture wars are invading our country thanks to Rupert Murdoch, with a hue and cry in the

conservative media about free speech and religious freedom—for the likes of Israel Folau, of course, not for Greta Thunberg or for GetUp. Now the sort of religion that needs defending is the sort of religion that we see in Deuteronomy today, and in Psalm 1 which echoes what the Old Testament scholars call this Deuteronomic theology. It's a simple sort of religion that people used to teach their children, and which many adults have never grown out of, though they may have abandoned this sort of religion because it never really proves reliable. The basic message, as in Deuteronomy and the Psalm today, is that God keeps track of who's naughty and nice and either rewards or punishes them accordingly. So today the nice, conservative, white and heterosexual people deserve the rewards and don't need to be told critical and confronting things—leave that to the inner-urban latte-sipping elites and other people who aren't nice, who don't love Australia, or coal, or the Sutherland Shire and its comfortable worldview.

But the Old Testament has a trick up its sleeve. It knows that you have to ween people off this kind of religion, so it counters the smug over-simplicity of the Deuteronomic theology with the story of Job, whose righteousness leads to suffering, just as his smug and pious advisers are claiming to speak for God. Or remember Ruth the Moabite—look who's coming to dinner! Yet this refugee from a hated nation becomes a heroine and a grand ancestor of Israel,

eventually of Jesus, too, which undermines the obsessive religious purity and racism of books like Ezra and Nehemiah. So, friends, we don't read the Old Testament, let alone the New Testament, as a compendium of pious thoughts and moral tips all representing conventional, bourgeois, smug and self-serving religion—a religion for the winners, which blesses their looking-down on the losers. Instead, the Old Testament canonises the overcoming of conventional human religiousness. It challenges a very familiar religious mindset, one that flourishes in every age, in the name of something more in tune with the complexities, the unresolvedness, the lack of Hollywood endings that's more typical of life in the real world and, moreover, it challenges all this in the name of God's compassion, God's mercy, which is steadily revealed and brought to prominence in the Old Testament.

And Jesus is the worst offender. He skewers the pieties in today's Gospel, challenging the commandment about honouring your father and mother, and refuting the Deuteronomic choice of life that we're given in our first reading by saying that we just might have to choose death—and that that death would be a mark of God's favour, to be found sharing Jesus' cross. Because, friends, God is on our side in the real world, in the thick of it with fragile, failed, morally compromised humanity and refusing to us go, having invested in our condition in person and never going back on that promise. In the life and death of

Jesus Christ, our God smiled on tax collectors, prostitutes and sinners, with a smile that alone can change locked-up, embittered lives. Our God went to the cross alongside criminals, too, even welcoming one into heaven that very day. Instead of moralistic black and white, Jesus on Easter Saturday chooses solidarity with the lost and the dead, showing Hell itself that Heaven is never out of reach. Here is the end of conventional religion, with its familiar boast of “I’m a good person,” with its expectation of a quiet well-deserved retirement after a life of uncomplicated docility, as one of Mr Morrison’s ‘quiet Australians’. No to that, says Jesus, pointing forward to a history of saints and martyrs and the transformation of our world through his example, as his Holy Spirit is let loose.

Of course the familiar old religion fails to get the message, even in the Church, preferring smugness, and populism, and so-called family values, and all the rest that we find scant sign of in Jesus’ living and dying. Friends, if that’s the sort of religion demanding the protection of its freedom, then it’s Jesus and his gospel that it needs protection from! Jesus is the real threat to what religion means in so many cultural contexts, then and now—a threat that Jesus learned from the Old Testament.

Now, friends, let me close by looking at an example of this challenge being put to work in the Church. It comes from Paul in the shortest

book of the Bible, his letter to a certain Philemon, which we hear in its entirety today. We come across Philemon very rarely in our Sunday lectionary, and maybe you're unfamiliar with it, but at only 25 verses it's easy to reread at home and to reflect on, even to talk over. Here Paul is making what might well be a life-or-death plea—for Onesimus, the runaway slave of Paul's associate, Philemon. Onesimus had committed a capital offence by running away and Paul does all he can to ensure a forgiving response from Philemon. The slave had become a Christian convert at Paul's hand and was now a useful collaborator in Paul's mission. On that basis Paul assures Philemon that he'll be getting back not just a slave but a newly-minted Christian brother, and a whole new start with someone whose presence in the house will now be a blessing and not a trial, as we might imagine it was before.

What we see here is Paul striving to overturn a whole world-view, a whole set of cultural norms, just as Jesus does in the Gospel. And if the crowd wouldn't have liked the challenge Jesus threw at them, we might imagine that Philemon didn't welcome Paul's challenge either. Perhaps this is why Paul has to pull out all the stops, to ensure a good outcome: cajoling Philemon, claiming his rights—to a guest room, for instance—and morally blackmailing Philemon on the basis of how much he owes Paul. The mention of charging any costs to Paul's account could mean that Paul was a valuable client, or it might

be a not-so-subtle reminder yet again that Philemon was in Paul's debt. This is the sort of bargaining that a desperate parent might be reduced to with a not-very-self-aware but strong-willed teenager. It shows what a change of attitude, of imagination, of heart, has to take place. And, of course, in more recent centuries Christians took the lead in overturning slavery and the slave trade, developing the vision of human equality that Paul commended to Philemon, and which comes ultimately from Jesus Christ. In so doing, these Christian abolitionists encountered the same affronted dignity from the establishment and the same claim to keep its religion unchallenged that Jesus met. Today's Christian advocates for justice, peace and climate action meet it, too, called meddling fools and worse by those who prefer the world in black and white, and their own position beyond question. This is what today's call for religious freedom really entails in my view: the call for a kind of religion that Jesus and Paul lived and died to unpick, and to replace with something better—and, of course, something more challenging.

The Lord be with you ...