

# **To Comfort the Afflicted and Afflict the Comfortable**

Sermon for Pentecost 6B, 4 July 2021

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

## **The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell**

Ezekiel 2; Psalm 123; 2 Corinthians 12: 2-10; Mark 6: 1-13

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

It's been said that the job of a newspaper is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable—a job description that's also been used to describe the Church's mission. Yet how many conventional Christians and Churches want anything to do with being disturbed, or challenged, let alone confronted? But this is clearly how God operates, if today's readings are any guide. The Church is meant to be challenging as well as comforting because God is challenging as well as comforting. Indeed, God's comfort is often revealed in challenge, disrupting our bitter expectations and unsettling us when we've gotten used to being disappointed in life. C.S. Lewis called this being surprised by joy, which can be a disruptive thing—especially in our modern Western culture which isn't notably joyful; where we learn to be content with resources, options and moments of happiness. According to the German sociologist Hartmut Rosa, these meagre aspirations spell alienation and help explain a range of

modern Western problems—in ourselves, among us, and between us and our climate-challenged world system.

Instead, what we need is to be surprised, enlarged, and blessed, which will very likely bring disruption—the challenge of having to dream bigger, to love truer, to think clearer. So, the good news of new life becomes bad news if we prefer clinging to the old life, to the status quo, to the familiar. Because that's not where meeting God leaves us. Instead, God's grace and mercy is insistent; it disturbs an overly settled life. And if we forget that, why would we expect people to see something in us and in our Anglican churches that would make them want to join us, and especially the young?

Today's readings all underscore this point. In each case there's an encounter with the living God that leads to changed lives and priorities and, in each case, people of faith are put on their mettle. To meet this living God is to have our sense of ourselves and the meaning of our life transformed. And, as strange as this might sound in a conventional Anglican context, it means being summoned to join the Church's mission of winning hearts and minds.

In our first reading today the prophet Ezekiel is given a scroll to eat, with a dense and difficult message for God's wayward people. The promise isn't comfort but conflict, because people then as now are

interested in God only up to a point. I'm reminded of something Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said, and he'd know: that when God calls someone, he calls them to die. The psalmist today knows this, but he's learned to make peace with challenging circumstances. He's sick of mockery and contempt from those who reject God, yet he's content to serve and to wait, and in this he proves an excellent role model for Christian clergy and laity whenever they face difficult challenges—for face them we all must.

St Paul is also in the thick of it in our 2 Corinthians reading today, in conflict with Christians who misunderstand the Gospel about which he's become entirely passionate, ever since his whole self-understanding was stood on its head by the risen Christ, who'd revealed himself to Paul on the road to Damascus.

Paul shows us today how a subsequent mystical experience had left him decentred, how his ego had been displaced, so that now he could leave self-aggrandisement to his opponents, content instead to boast in his weakness. So, as Paul declares his mystic's credentials, in the same breath he admits to a struggle with some abiding weakness that he hates but which God hasn't been pleased to remove. That way, Paul will always be reminded of his reliance on God's strength while he has to live with this liability. And what was that weakness? Was it a speech defect, was it an unimpressive appearance, was it

epilepsy—or was it homosexuality, as Bishop Spong once speculated? Whatever this weakness that Paul had to struggle with, he saw it as part of his apostolic equipment, so people could see that his trust was in God and not in his own accomplishments.

And finally, to our Gospel today, with its unsettling encounter between the home crowd in Nazareth and the local boy made good. Crowds are fickle, and immediately this crowd takes offence at Jesus. They knew who he was, his humble local origins, his undistinguished parents and siblings (or, if you're a Roman Catholic, his cousins!). So who does he think he is, talking to them like this? And there speaks a certain sort of rural or regional voice to this day, whenever the Church in faithfulness to Christ tries to challenge the prevailing narrative—whether about indigenous issues or carbon emissions or coal or refugees or whatever. Our rural and regional clergy are regularly reminded of where their bread's buttered and what they can and can't say.

But in similar circumstances we see that Jesus is undeterred. He sends out his disciples on an urgent mission. He instructs them that there's no time for the customary pleasantries while stopping on the road. There's no time for playing status games when they arrive somewhere, either, seeking better accommodation. Overall, the message is uncompromising. To encounter the Kingdom of God is to

face a choice, and of course most people choose to have no part of it. Jesus was regularly rejected and eventually crucified after all, which is how people typically treat God—"he came to his own people," as John's Gospel prologue reminds us, "and his own people received him not."

Friends, our uncompromising God has a better life in store for us than settling for Hartmut Rosa's modern Western trifecta: resources, options and moments of happiness. Not a conventional life, then, and not an easy one, either. The Kingdom of God brings a comfort that disturbs, as well as a disturbance that's ultimately more comforting than the conventional alternatives.

Let me end with a little story. The great missionary doctor Albert Schweitzer was first a university theologian, and in 1906 he published a book translated into English as *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. After this he resigned his professorship to become a lowly medical student, qualifying as a doctor, then he devoted his life to the hospital at Lambaréné in what was then French Equatorial Africa, from 1912 until his death in 1965. Why did he do it? And what's that got to do with today's theme of the comfort and affliction that accompany meeting the living God, the God of Jesus Christ?

Schweizer knew that the religion of Jesus would never be really popular or successful in a worldly sense but, still, he knew that this call was uncompromising. I'll let Schweizer have the last word, his final paragraph from *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, where he shows what encountering Jesus Christ had meant for him.

He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake-side, He came to those men who knew him not. He speaks to us the same word, "Follow thou me!" and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfil for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in his fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.

The Lord be with you ...