

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost 2021

Amos 7:7-14, Mark 6:14-29

Sport and politics are uncomfortable bed fellows. There are often calls to keep politics out of sport, but I believe it is inevitable that the two are entwined. Potentially sport has a prophetic role, shedding light on inequality, racism and the like. Overnight we have enjoyed seeing Ash Barty win at Wimbledon and appreciated her humility as well as her prowess. Walking in the footsteps of Evonne Goolagong she has done much to draw our attention to the issue of indigenous affairs in her quiet self-effacing manner. But more often than not prophecy needs to be accompanied by protest, indeed prophecy involves sacrifice.

In July 1971, fifty years ago this week, two sisters and their friends managed to disrupt a Rugby Union test match between Australia and the touring South African Springboks. The front page of The Australian newspaper showed the leader of the 'Stop the Tours' campaign being dragged from the SCG pitch; she received a two month jail sentence for her trouble. The jailed protestor was Meredith Burgmann daughter of Ernest Burgmann the Bishop of this Diocese from 1934-1960. Her protest and subsequent advocacy went some way to changing the way that sports administrators and politicians dealt with teams from South Africa many of which were selected on the basis of race.

Speaking out against injustice is a tough gig. Meredith Burgmann's two months in jail seems harsh today, and in our gospel reading this morning we are confronted with one of the harshest, most dramatic accounts in the New Testament. An event prefigured by Old Testament accounts of the prophets such as the story of Amos that we heard this morning, an event which itself prefigures the death of Jesus. There is a thread running through the Biblical witness - those who dare to challenge the status quo are marginalised, silenced, exiled, at worse executed. And what keeps us tied to the status quo? It seems either fear or greed, or both.

In the eighth century BC the prophet Amos from Judea, the southern kingdom is sent packing by Amaziah the Priest because he persistently speaks out against the injustices of his day. The people of Northern kingdom are enjoying economic success, it is bypassing many. Amos is exiled. In our gospel we read of the gruesome demise of John the Baptist. The king in the story Herod Antipas, is the son of Herod the Great who reigned at the birth of Jesus and ordered the slaughter of the innocents. The Herod family are the ruling elite but are the puppets of Rome and generally despised by the populace. Herod Antipas has a half-brother Philip who is married to Herodias. He persuades them to divorce so that he can marry Herodias, and John speaks out. Retribution is swift and when Herodias' daughter whom we have come to know as Salome, 'amuses' the

king and he foolishly offers her anything she wants. Her mother sees the opportunity. John the Baptist who describes himself as 'the voice:' 'I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness' is silenced.

As we come to the end of another NAIDOC week celebrating the cultural achievements of the indigenous people of this land it is perhaps an opportunity for us to listen again to that voice crying from the wilderness and not just the voice of our own indigenous folk but those from many other nations. Recent events in Canada have shocked the people of that nation, one so similar to our own.

Amos uses the metaphor of a plumb line as a guide to see how the northern kingdom is fairing - it fails to meet the standard. What of the plumb line for us as a nation? Australia is a runaway economic success, but the plumb line seems to have been set pretty low. We were reminded last week that resources, options and a fleeting glimpse of happiness seem to be what matter and it strikes me that many in our community fail to even enjoy these lowly aspirations, many of them are indigenous.

NAIDOC week is an opportunity to celebrate the culture and spiritual lives of the first peoples of this continent. But whilst we might enjoy the art and the dance and the ancient stories of the Dreamtime we can't escape the fact that the celebrations of this week have their roots in a day of remembrance first commemorated in 1938 at the instigation of William Cooper. Cooper held an 'Aboriginal Day of Mourning' on 26 January 1938. It coincided the 150th anniversary of the landing of the First Fleet and raised awareness of what this meant for the Indigenous population. The day evolved into a National Aborigines Day, or Aboriginal Sunday, first observed in 1940 on the weekend before Australia Day. Cooper's inspiration was the Biblical narrative of liberation, the voices of the prophets calling for justice, they spoke into the situation of his Yorta Yorta people. We as a Church belong at the heart of this week of both celebration and commemoration, of both joy and of repentance.

Following the Uluru statement from the heart in 2017 our General Synod supported the call for a constitutionally-entrenched First Nations' Voice to the Commonwealth Parliament. ABM subsequently produced a study called 'A voice in the wilderness' which is available on line and really worth engaging with. The question for us in the Church is are we prepared to work to allow that Voice in the Wilderness to be heard? Perhaps a better question is ask ourselves what is preventing us from working towards 'a voice,' the status quo perhaps.

Clearly we need to listen to the voice of prophetic witness of our ancient scriptures to understand their call for justice and to make it our own. As a student I spent time with the then Bishop of Alaska, Mark Macdonald. He is now the Bishop for the Indigenous people of Canada, he has recently been

in my thoughts and prayers. He wrote this which has stuck with me:
'Mission is really about the word of God becoming living and real in every culture, in every place, in every person. There is an innate translatableness to the gospel. The gospel thrives on being translated. It's the only thing in life that says 'the more it's translated the closer it gets to the original.' It's the only thing that dares to make that audacious claim.'

Our calling is to make the gospel live in our day and time. Is there not a call for us to listen to the voice in the wilderness? Are we courageous enough, or will it be silenced?