

The Good News of the Cross

Sermon for the 5th Sunday in Lent, Year B, 21 March 2021

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

The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell

Jeremiah 31: 31-34; Psalm 119: 9-16; Hebrews 5: 5-14; John 12: 20-33

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

Well, it's the fifth Sunday in Lent, Good Friday is less than a fortnight away, and the cross is beginning to announce itself in our readings. But the cross is presented today in a way that requires some unpacking. Some Greeks come to a Jewish festival asking to see Jesus, and we see our man Philip trying to work out what's going on with Andrew, his fellow bearer of a Greek name. No-one's quite sure what to do, and the strange situation gets stranger when Jesus immediately launches into a lecture about his coming death. Clearly the arrival of these foreigners provokes a crisis, and Jesus' death becomes an immediate prospect. What's going on here; what's Jesus telling us both about his death, and about our lives?

Jesus' death is certainly a human reaction to the threat he poses—for attracting all sorts of people who aren't seen as being equal, or worthy of welcome. Greeks and all sorts of foreigners, apart from Jews, were part of the early Church, and this precipitated the same-sex marriage crisis of its day. Jesus' welcome extends not only beyond Israel but beyond the Church's comfort zone, too, with payback sure to be coming.

And the problem didn't end back then. As we've seen in our own national life of late, equality and respect for women is still regularly denied, just as race equality is resisted by the American far right, free speech in China, and political self-determination in Myanmar. Seek a different outcome and you're likely to be attacked in the press and social media, and in some places even to be killed. Jesus knows this and he doesn't flee from these likely consequences, reminding us in today's gospel that we can't flee from them either—not if we're to be his followers, his witnesses, his collaborators.

But Jesus also talks about what his death will achieve. Not just another squalid political killing, then, which the perpetrators hope will change nothing, but a manifestation of God's glory and God's reconciliation, which will change everything. Instead of the crucifixion representing a judgement on him, Jesus declares that his cross brings the world to judgement, and the ruler of this world. And rather than presenting an oppressive, repulsive, dispiriting spectacle, the cross will instead prove attractive, so that everyone can come home to God because Jesus has been lifted up. This is the sort of death it is: not alienating and paralysing, but reconciling and life-giving.

This is possible because of who Jesus is. We're reminded in today's Gospel that he's God's beloved Son, and hence it's God in person who submits to the iron law of human business as usual, to the apparently inevitable way of things that we can't seem to get over or get past.

But the root belief of Christians is that Jesus' death somehow shifts reality on its axis, as God in Christ takes all of

humanity's anger and bitter resentment and fear of the other onto himself and becomes the hated other, yet without giving in to evil and payback himself. Jesus' arms opened wide in love constitute judgement enough, and as even the worst of us see that invitation, hard hearts can be broken, and cynical imaginations can be set free. God isn't harsh and disapproving so we live in fear of the other and what we might lose, but God is reconciling and welcoming, so we can leave our fear behind and step forward in response to Jesus' invitation.

Friends, there was no other way for us back to God apart from God offering this act of reassurance in person: that the very worst we could do would not be enough to stop God loving and yearning for us. And in that assurance of forgiveness and welcome, we start to change. We become people who can break free of the herd mind and start to live differently, to welcome unreservedly, to forgive willingly, to learn the habits of fearlessness that will judge and liberate a fearful world. Friends, God's judgement is evident in this patient, forbearing fellowship of the cross, which bears God's

power to confront, and judge, to lift up and to forgive. The cross reveals that God's judgement of the world is nothing other than God's self-giving, reconciling love, and this truth liberates us.

That way we become the people that Jeremiah tells us about today, who've so internalised God's loving purposes, God's law, that the covenant now lies within us, and God shines out of our faces. That way we become the creature of delight who we meet in today's psalm, confident in God's love and a life dedicated to God's purposes. That way we become the ones that our Hebrews reading hopes we'll become, sustained by the solid food of this serious Christian teaching: people "whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil"—that is, people who've learned to know God's mind from the inside.

The reference to the Old Testament priest Melchizidek as a figure for Jesus in Hebrews today recalls a character who belonged to no specific tribe or dynasty, and was of no particular pedigree, hence he had nothing to protect and

nothing to boast about. So here again we have an image of Christ pointing beyond all our narrow, comfortable self-definitions, so we can come to love as broadly, as inclusively, as outrageously as he does.

Remember those divine-human arms stretched out in the agony, ignominy and failure of the cross, and remember that this is what God's glory looks like, God's self-giving love—so that the spell of evil can be broken, so that we humans can begin to imagine and live and love differently.

Jesus' teaching about his cross in today's Gospel gives us the big picture, of how far God goes to change the world of human possibilities from the inside, and at what cost. The good news—and the bad news—is that we Christians are being called to mature faith, and today's readings show what that maturity looks like. In our world of stubborn exclusions, stopped ears and hard hearts, our journey with Jesus to Easter is taking us along a road decidedly less travelled.

The Lord be with you ...