

Meet the Antichrist

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost Year C — 21 August 2022

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

The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell

Isaiah 58: 9b-14; Psalm 103: 1-8; Hebrews 12: 18-29; Luke 13: 10-17

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

Some words to ponder from our Psalm today:

The Lord is full of compassion and mercy:
Slow to anger and of great goodness (Psalm 103: 8).

It's been pointed out that Jesus wasn't a social liberal, he wasn't a progressive, he was just compassionate. And in this he faithfully represents the God of Israel. Our Psalm reminds us that God's compassion and mercy were revealed to Moses and the children of Israel oppressed in Egypt. This is who our God *is*—God's not the conclusion of a philosophical speculation, or some vague something or other, but the lead character in a real-world story of love and liberation that we're part of in this Eucharist today.

As for all those who think that God's monstrous, and who blame God for many cruelties and misfortunes in life, their view is acknowledged in Hebrews today, but they're reassured that it's not really like that.

You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them.

Instead, to meet God is to be caught up in something wonderful and joyful, something humanising and liberating, and I'm convinced that what comes next in our Hebrews reading refers to the Eucharist, imagined as a great feast of the whole cosmos at peace with God.

But you *have* come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

That is, it speaks a better word than human business as usual; a better word than you'll hear in the city that Cain built after murdering Abel, according to Genesis 4; a better word than every subsequent human civilization that speaks only violence and exclusion and the spilling of blood—which, by the way, is why Jesus let his blood be spilled, because God always has to be opposed and expelled if we're to sustain this world of violent expulsion, isn't that so? Yet this world of violent expulsion is put on notice by the resurrection, the great triumph of God's compassion and mercy, and by the outpouring of God's Holy Spirit, God's advocate for the defence, who's overcoming that hateful world—overcoming it here today in the Eucharist, and then out there as the Eucharist's geo-political and cultural implications are worked out by faithful Christians in every walk of life.

And, friends, this violent exclusion is being challenged in our Gospel today, just as it is every day in our world and in our lives.

Jesus in Luke's Gospel is consistently portrayed as the agent of God's mercy and compassion. And very often it's women who he notices, women whose culturally imposed burdens he feels, and women who he sets free from what constrains them. Isn't there

something symbolic about this woman long bent over under an unbearable burden, unable to stand up with her back straight, and then her burden being lifted by Jesus? Here Luke uses osteopathy to point to theology.

And women still bear shocking burdens today, don't they? The women under Taliban rule in Afghanistan are an obvious example. But so are poor black and Hispanic women in America, who are the real target of the hard-right's obsession with ending abortion, along with bolshie white women who want more from life than a subservient role in a patriarchal circus. As you know I'm no champion of abortion, far from it, but this isn't really about abortion. It's about loading a burden on women's backs to keep them subservient. But our God is in the business of lifting burdens off the backs of women.

Even in more sensible Australia, we've just had a federal election in which women who'd had enough played a big part in unseating an increasingly hard-right government—a groundswell of women who didn't forget the Britney Higgins affair, or Grace Tame's protest, or the huge disjunct between so much domestic violence, so many murders of women, and government inaction.

It's interesting that the synagogue head in today's Gospel is particularly indignant when Jesus stands up for a woman. Indeed, Jesus tells the religious leaders that they're hypocrites, that they'd treat their ox or donkey better. It's not about the sabbath, then, just as today it's not about abortion. It's really about preserving a particular structure of power and control at the cost of any amount of suffering. I bet the head of that synagogue wished he'd made himself minister for health, so that he could cancel Jesus' healing.

Friends, the synagogue head and all the religious types like him are presented here very clearly as God's enemies. They're opposed to the God of Israel, the God of Jesus Christ, because they refuse compassion and mercy, the defining characteristics of our God. They are effectively the antichrist—they, and their many spiritual descendants today in Russia, in America and around the world, who won't let anything come between them and the all-important goal of gaining and holding power.

They think that we have to keep the unwelcome other under control and out of power, in order to preserve our way of life, to protect our fragile heritage. This is what the Nazis said about the Jews, and what Putin still says—the cockroaches have to be exterminated, lest they take us over. Let's do God's work, then, and bomb Ukrainian civilians. Yet our Isaiah reading today says that compassion and mercy come at anything but a cost to our prosperity. Instead, Isaiah tells us that this attitude leads to the rebuilding of ancient ruins, and to the repairing of breaches.

As for insisting on the religious rules, like the sabbath, they're to be received as a gift that spells joy and thankful celebration, not used as a stick to beat the unworthy back into submission. You don't Make America Great Again by religious contempt for uppity blacks and Hispanics, by blaming Black Lives Matter for actual hard right-wing violence, because God's economy links compassion and mercy with prosperity and security. Is that so hard to imagine—that being compassionate and merciful builds trust, builds solidarity, builds co-operation, and hence builds an economy, along with a strong and stable society?

Yes, I am talking a form of Christian socialism, as Anglo-Catholics always have, but I just can't find warrant in the Bible for the neoliberal order, Christian nationalism, and authoritarian populism. Yet these scourges are bringing our world to the brink—of environmental crisis, of a renewed nuclear threat, of civil society's collapse. And the only people who want it that way are those like the Synagogue head and his off-stage cronies in today's Gospel, all of whom Jesus calls hypocrites.

Friends, those who use the Bible as a stick to beat the unaligned and the unconventional should look at what the Bible actually says—and why not start with today’s Gospel? And, yes, I include the champions of this new breakaway Diocese of the Southern Cross, set up to protect genuinely God-fearing Anglicans from people like us here at St Philip’s, O’Connor, or at least from people like me.

Because friends, here in the Eucharist together, in the words of our Hebrews reading,

You *have not* come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them. . . . But you *have* come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

The Lord be with you.