

***Strong in Identity, At one in Christ***

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost 2022 — Year C — 30 October 2022

Reverend Martin Johnson

*Isaiah 1.10-18, Psalm 32.1-8, 2 Thessalonians 1.1-4, 11-12; Luke 19.1-10*

Yesterday at our Parish Day we endeavoured to learn where we sat on the spectrum, the Church spectrum that is. Broadly speaking St Philip's was located on the vertical axis in a spot not too high and not too low, and on the horizontal axis from the centre out towards the progressive; it was where I expected us to be. It seems however that, wherever you are on the spectrum, Isaiah is having a go this morning. Incense burning High Church folk and Pentecostal arm wavers, along with those who enjoy long prayers are all given a serve!

*incense is an abomination to me.*

*When you stretch out your hands,  
I will hide my eyes from you;  
even though you make many prayers,  
I will not listen;*

It is a reminder to that our Liturgy must, at its heart, draw us closer to God in worship and to each other in love and from there to the world, the prophecy goes on:

*learn to do good;  
seek justice,  
rescue the oppressed,  
defend the orphan,  
plead for the widow.*

Our liturgy should provide a means to 'rehearse' the practice of justice toward others, building the common good of all people. If our liturgy fails to inspire us in this way, then we need to think again. For us to do this we need to consider where there is injustice today and what should be our response.

Our Psalm this morning is a little reminiscent of that great Australian poem 'My Country' by Dorothea MacKellar:

*I love a sunburnt country,  
A land of sweeping plains,  
Of ragged mountain ranges,  
Of drought and flooding rains.  
I love her far horizons,  
I love her jewel-sea,  
Her beauty and her terror —  
The wide brown land for me!*

It truly is a land of droughts and flooding rains as once again we see major rivers in the east burst their banks and flood homes and businesses. Climate change aside, it has, of course always been so, we can't really say this unprecedented. The first peoples of our continent would no doubt have experienced such events, along with the droughts and fires that ravage the bush. I quote:

Universities are including our wisdom about the earth, the stars, flora, and fauna, as well as the human body and mind, in their curriculums. Climatologists, botanists, and

environmental scientists are consulting with us about how to better manage country. Fire authorities are seeking to learn about our fire-farming techniques.

This is part of an address given at a conference organised by the Uniting Church Synod of New South Wales and the ACT, held last weekend. The conference was titled ‘Walking Together: How can the Church embrace First Peoples’ theology in a Post-Colonial Australia.’ The address was given by Gary Deverell a Lecturer and Research Fellow in the School of Indigenous Studies at the University of Divinity in Melbourne. It was wide ranging, but at its heart was a call for recognition and restitution by the Church. It reminded once again of a crucial issue of justice in our nation in our time.

When I read this address alongside the gospel passage proclaimed this morning, I realised that at its heart our reading from Luke is about recognition and restitution. Deverell goes on:

‘So, let me be so bold as to suggest that the churches are at a *kairos*, a threshold of decision: a critical or opportune moment. In other words, you are at a crossroads.’

This is Zacchaeus, for him this is a critical moment he needs to act if he is to return to centre of his community. We can see these two elements are clearly at play, he needs to understand who he is and what that means.

Part of our problem is self-recognition. We are what we are called to be when we worship, when we reflect God’s love back to God. Only Christ can do this, that why we are ‘in Christ’ and we worship and pray ‘through Christ’ and in this way we can look beyond ourselves. Zacchaeus climbed a tree to see Christ and we see the fruits of his recognition... restitution, justice. Zacchaeus restores what had been unjustly taken and in turn Jesus reminds him of his identity...a Son of Abraham.

When we recognise who we are, we recognise our call to embody justice and we recognise more fully those around us and our responsibilities to them. Part of this is restitution, Deverell again says:

... land and resource justice is really just a beginning, a foundation. At the same time, the churches would do well to allow us (for the first time) to set up camp in the centre of your corporate life: to allow us to migrate from the periphery — where we are out of sight, out of earshot, out of mind and heart — into the places where theology is formulated, and decisions made about ministry and mission. Because you need us.

If like Zacchaeus we move from the outside, recognizing our identity, we can more fully encourage others, draw others from the edges, recognise them... because we need them.

Returning again to the prophets and their challenge. Jeremiah writes to the people of Israel as they contemplate the future and the loss of their land and identity:

*Thus says the Lord:  
Stand at the crossroads, and look,  
ask for the ancient paths,  
ask where the good way lies;  
and walk in it.  
Then you will find rest for your souls.*

Deverell in turn challenges us: *Perhaps the churches might now answer the divine voice differently than did the ancient Israelites?* I quote Jeremiah again: ‘But they said, “We will not walk in it.”’

What of us? Can we be strong in our identity, a deep sense of our being at one in worship with Christ and with each other? From there will we recognise others and their call for justice and so together take our place with them, not on the outside but in the heart of things? Amen.