

Reassurance for the Challenged

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A, 2 July 2023

The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell

Jeremiah 28:5-9; Psalm 89:1-4; Romans 6:12-23; Matthew 10:40-42

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

In last week's Gospel Jesus challenged us with those confronting words, "I come not to bring peace but a sword", pointing to the stable, defining, complacent family and social realities that he and his disciples were busy disrupting. Not kith and kin, then, not the socio-political status quo, not the same-old same-old, but *the gospel* will provide our identity, our bearings in life, and our mission. And the flack that Jesus drew for disrupting established habits of mind will also come our way as his disciples.

But there's good news as well as bad. Jesus assured us in last Sunday's gospel that every one of our hairs was counted—that God would watch over us in the face of any conflict that our fidelity to Jesus might bring our way. This reassurance continues in today's short Gospel passage. Jesus tells us that his exposed disciples will find supporters and not just opponents, and that anyone who cares for them and eases their burdens—even with a cup of water—will be noticed by him and blessed for it.

Those of us in the ordained ministry have met sympathetic outsiders to the faith like these who've nevertheless taken our side, bankrolled our pet projects, been supportive of us in the face of opposition and just cared for us. That these people exist, and that such care can be anticipated, reminds us that Jesus is with us in any difficulties we might face as his disciples. It's good to be reminded, too, that he's also with these caring people who may not be card-carrying Christians but who serve Jesus and his cause even if unknowingly. Has Christian conviction ever required *you* to take an unpopular stand or to land in conflict or to make an enemy—at home, at work, in the neighbourhood? If so, I hope you found some of the support that I'm talking about, and which Jesus assumes we will find.

Now, this same promise of support is variously present in our other readings today. Perhaps Hananiah, the false Prophet from central casting who we meet in our Jeremiah reading, is more fearful than he needs to be about the threat of Judah's exile in Babylon. So he gilds the lily, prophesying that it will all be over soon. And aren't there a lot of false prophets like him around still, for instance in the face of climate change, of race relations, and of rising concerns about artificial intelligence: "Everything will be fine; don't overthink it". Jeremiah, however, is the true prophet, and he offers no easy comfort. Instead, he'll go on to prepare Judah spiritually for what'll turn out to be a generations-long exile in Babylon, where he believes nevertheless that God's exiled people will be able to settle. So, reassurance, yes, but not by avoiding the challenges—not by fearfully resiling from them. Church leaders who prefer to gild the lily about today's many challenges for traditional churches in the West would do well to take note.

In the same spirit, our Psalm today offers reassurance that God would remain faithful to King David's line forever. God's covenant with the king is a big theme in the Old Testament, meant to reassure God's people in the face of recurring threats to their nation. And this reassurance wouldn't be necessary if not for a genuine threat.

But now I want to take some time over our Romans reading, because it'll make little sense to normal mainstream Anglicans with its talk of being enslaved to sin. I remember my adopted

father, who didn't like me much, when I'd come home with some news from Sunday School: apparently, I told him, we're all sinners. My old man replied that *he* didn't commit sins. He was a sarcastic and occasionally violent man but apparently that was okay given his position of elevated righteousness—he was after all a respectable householder, wage-earner, taxpayer, and voter for Joh Bjelke-Peterson. But despite my old man's comforting delusions, it's sinners that we remain, and slavery is a good image for that condition.

Likewise, so is addiction, as the Roman Catholic ethicist Richard McCormick points out. Sin means a state of life that we can't escape, just as addicts can't escape their condition without a lot of help. It may be a matter of so-called hot sins that entrap us, or more typically for the likes of us it will be cold sins, including the sins of omission—things we've failed to do: failure to love, failure to go the extra mile, failure to make that overdue call or offer that friendly greeting, failure to step up, failure to speak out, or else failure to bite our tongue when we know we should, failure to risk unpopularity and failure to put our hand in our pocket even when our conscience is prodding us.

Stubborn generational conflict in families, harsh and rusted on political attitudes, crazy unsustainable beliefs, racial antipathies, and long-nursed personal hurts—which become defining characteristics—are all examples of slavery to sin. Our whole Western civilization has been enslaved to uncaring neoliberal socio-economic values and a dangerous game of Russian roulette with our environment and climate. Sin, be it personal, social, economic, or civilizational, is a state of slavery from which we can't save ourselves. Hence, we Christians look to Jesus and his Easter breakthrough, also to Pentecost where we're caught up by the Holy Spirit as part of the solution rather than part of the problem. And don't give me that "But I think I'm a good person" line, which is the self-justifying comment that we clergy have heard at least a hundred times. Whenever I hear it, I'm reminded that pride is first among the seven deadly sins.

Instead, for we Christians, there's reassurance here that we've been brought from death to life, from what deadens to what vivifies; we've been brought from law to grace, from what condemns and fosters resentment to what liberates and enlarges. So, sin has no more dominion over us, as we sing in the Easter Anthems. This is what the resurrection demonstrated before a world full of crucified victims and their murderers in the grip of an age-old addiction.

Instead, for us comes Paul's cheeky reassurance today: that a new form of slavery awaits us—slavery to righteousness, that is, and no longer to sin. And righteousness doesn't mean being prissy or too-self-consciously religious, which can just be a more subtle form of sin. Instead, it's simply being with Christ and becoming more like Christ. And this of course is central to why we come here to the Eucharist. Because without a regular diet of word and sacrament and the support of fellow Christians we won't find the strength, the resolve, and the reassurance we need. Here we're helped to leave slavery of sin behind; here we're helped to step forward boldly in the embrace of Christ's righteousness.

The Lord be with you ...