

*The Voice Debate, the Zero-Sum Game, and the Christian Alternative*

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

Third Sunday after Pentecost, Year A — 18 June 2023

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*Exodus 19:2-8a; Psalm 100; Romans 5:1-11; Matthew 9:35-10:8*

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

Well, the debate on the voice referendum is heating up. Will we give First Nations Australians a place of dignity in our parliamentary process? As whole peoples, that is, and not just as occasional dark-skinned parliamentarians in a sea of white faces. Will we be large-souled and generous as a nation, or will the all-too-familiar Pauline Hanson-style claims carry the day: that this will entrench racial division, that it will split Australia, that it won't work? I fear that beyond what people actually admit to pollsters, it's long-nursed personal hurt and felt neglect that play a big part in the 'No' case. This often goes back to harsh childhood conditioning and reflects a lifetime of disappointed expectations: why are they getting something that I'm not getting?

In America we see the same widespread attitude in what's been called the moral despair of declining classes—clinging to white supremacy, frustrated entitlement, conspiracy theories, and an increasingly bitter hatred of anyone different—though in America there's the added scandal that this toxic brew is being dressed up as Christianity.

But in our readings today, as ever in our Eucharist, we're reminded of what Christianity is actually about, as we're summoned to the adventure of liberated imaginations and generous lives—to living a little bit high on the fumes of grace. Which can free us from the zero-sum game that so many are locked into—the game of 'you win, I lose'; the joyless game of perpetually defeated personalities.

In our Exodus reading today, Moses, who Christians recognise as Jesus's great forerunner, calls Israel into a covenant of mutual faithfulness with their gracious God—the God who delivered them from the bitterness of slavery in Egypt. Here the universal God makes a particular claim, with a suffering people being given a whole new identity, a whole new future, a whole new set of possibilities in fidelity to God's promises. In our Gospel reading today Jesus reveals this same divine intent for the lost sheep of Israel, enlisting his disciples in his own mission. They're to share with Jesus in bringing God's loving reign. This means an end to alienation and helpless outsidership, an end to living in the imaginative grip of death and despair—or at least this is what curing the sick, cleansing the lepers and raising the dead will look like in our time and place. This breakthrough is what the good news of Jesus Christ unleashes, and how different it is from the bad news that structures the world view of so many, making them bitter and resentful, narrow-minded and unbending.

Friends, this is the very antithesis of how the world can look for Christians. Instead, for us, we can find joy and thankfulness bubbling up where others have settled for a scarcity mentality, or a grim stoicism, or a depressive hopelessness. So, when the Psalmist today exhorts us to come into the Lord's gates with thanksgiving and into his courts with praise, we do so here in the Eucharist, which is a word that means thanksgiving. The Eucharist-centred life is a thankful life, a hopeful life, a joyful life, even, which is a life beyond the zero-sum game.

To see what this Christian life looks like, we have the marvellous passage from St Paul today in Romans 5. He talks about justification by faith, which carries us beyond the everywhere-popular alternative which is self-justification. So, Christians needn't be building themselves up at the expense of others, like so many who resent the non-white, the poor and unemployed, the homeless and addicted, the immigrants, the Muslims, the same-sex oriented and the gender divergent. And how have we escaped all that? Because God justifies us, because God accepts us, calling us to live free of all the poisonous baggage that's dragging down our civilization, our world, and even many of our churches.

Paul explains that we can stand confidently in the grace of God, and so we needn't be anxiously and belligerently tending to our fragile egos. Instead, we can boast about being given a share in God's glory. And in the meantime, we can face life's sufferings in a new spirit. We can see suffering as an opening to the good, fostering endurance, character and hope rather than the widespread alternatives, which are peevishness, pettiness and paralysis.

This is all about God overcoming bitterness and enmity in us, through Jesus who refused to look down on us or condemn us but who instead went to the cross for us, opening a whole new Easter existence beyond the death-limited imagination: of love not hate, of grace not bitterness, of forgiveness not vendetta, of open hearts not closed minds. And all this while we were too weak to do it for ourselves.

Friends, it's not self-justifying self-righteousness to recognise and name this problem that we see all around us. It's just the humble recognition that, thanks be to God, we ourselves have been rescued from that fate through our baptism into a new covenant with new possibilities. And among these possibilities is becoming agents and witnesses of this new human reality, this kingdom of God.

It's nice to see the disciples named one by one in our Gospel today, as they're sent out to demonstrate a new way of being human. In the same way you and I were named publicly in our baptism, in our confirmation, perhaps in marriage and ordination, too—named and called in these sacramental actions as sacramental agents of the human condition being put right by God. The alternative of course is the zero-sum game—a world in which bitterness wins, in which nothing fundamental ever changes, and in which even Christians forget that they have good news to share with the world.

So, finally, regarding the voice referendum, ask yourself this: how should Christians who're being set free from the besetting anxious bitterness of our times approach this issue? If the joy and good news of the gospel have begun to unseat and undo disappointment, hurt and even grievance in our lives, then how might that play out at the ballot box?

The Lord be with you . . .