

## *Loyal to a future*

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A, 25 June 2023

Reverend Martin Johnson

*Jeremiah 20.7-13; Psalm 69.7-19; Romans 6.1-11; Matthew 10.29-39*

My thanks to the honourable gentleman for his question!

Those of you who were with us last Sunday would know that a question was posed to us regarding the forthcoming referendum: our preacher Canon Scott concluded:

Regarding the Voice referendum, ask yourself this: how should Christians who are 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?

We now know that we will be called to vote on an amendment to our Constitution to enshrine an indigenous voice into our founding document. The answer to the question put to us leads us to a second question which concerns our identity: 'Who are we?' Or perhaps, 'What are striving to become?' Today's readings are about our identity, who we are.

For the Jewish people among whom Jesus came, identity was largely concerned with adherence to the law and with kinship. Jesus first, and then Paul, reframed these identity markers; we are still trying to follow their call. We are still, as it were, on a voyage of self-discovery. From last week's sermon again: we are *being* set free, the gospel has *begun* to unseat and undo disappointment, etc. This is an unfinished project for us.

Those who are opposed to the Voice generally say, 'What will it do, what will it change, what difference will it make? On one level, these are valid, reasonable, rational questions. But they suggest an unwillingness to *begin* a journey to something beyond the simply pragmatic. It is human nature, we know that. Jesus and Paul both knew that, and between them they describe how we are set free from that which holds us back. Jesus' message is a call to courage. He doesn't hide or sugar coat the difficulties of this journey, he lays bare the kind of opposition that will be faced by those who are prepared to set out on this journey. This is important, our faith is one that is lived out, it is more than simply pragmatic or propositional. I know we say it often and it can sound trite, but we are pilgrim people and the pilgrim has a kind of loyalty to where he or she is going and by extension to those who are to come after us. The Voice referendum may change little in our time, but our loyalties are to a time that is yet to come and those who will be a part of that time.

This morning's gospel contains some harsh words of Jesus about the loyalties that we might think are obvious and pressing, the loyalties of family and friends. But Jesus is saying, unless you have a loyalty that is greater than that, your limited and local loyalty will be something inward looking and destructive; we know, don't we, what insular loyalties - familial, tribal or national look like.

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews, puts it: 'Jesus suffers now, for the joy that is set before him.' Jesus speaks about, and acts out, a loyalty to what is not yet. This is hard, this is difficult, again it almost goes against human nature and yet this is what we are sent out to do, more importantly than that; this is who we are. And this is what Paul is writing about: we are living out the marks of our baptismal identity.

When families come among us to get their children ‘done’ I almost always remind them that their child will leave the church unchanged, indeed they may leave the church traumatised by being half-drowned by a strange man in an elaborate frock! What baptism is about, in part, is a loyalty to *the future*, loyalty to what is not yet.

The phrase ‘dying to self’ doesn’t appear in our scriptures, but the idea is there in the gospels and in Paul’s letters, it’s there in Matthew this morning too: ‘those who find their life will lose it...’ We also heard this morning ‘Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.’ It should be said there is much debate and conjecture about these challenging texts, but if we read them and reflect upon them within the broader context of the Biblical tradition then we are on firm ground. We need to understand these texts as challenges, challenges to us about our loyalty to our baptismal identity.

The challenge is laid bare for us this morning in the passage from Jeremiah. It is true that the Church to an extent has been cowed into submission. We lack a voice in the public sphere. Jeremiah faced such a dilemma; he was derided for speaking out, and he fell silent:

‘I will not mention him,  
or speak any more in his name’,

But he went on:

then within me there is something like a burning fire  
shut up in my bones;  
I am weary with holding it in,  
and I cannot.

This is a burden that we bear. Yes, we are wearied by it from time to time. But this prophetic voice cannot, must not, be silenced. Jeremiah describes it as something like a burning fire, which should immediately alert us to the Spirit who is at the heart of our identity. Perhaps Matthew is warning us that we should be afraid of losing this Spirit and therefore losing our identity. But in true prophetic style we also told, three times, not to be afraid.

Both Matthew and Paul are describing the challenges of their own communities and, despite the distance of time and culture, they are, in some respects, not so different from our own. The antidote to the issues we face is exactly the same. We need to remain loyal to our identity, that means that we do need to die to self, die to the now, and to be loyal to a future beyond ourselves. Many are fearful of this, our human nature is very strong, but this is our calling, this is our identity. Both our gospel and epistle end in the same vein; finding our true selves is indeed where God abides, it is an unfinished project, it is where our loyalties lie. Amen.