

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A, 8 October 2023

Reverend Martin Johnson

Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80:7-15; Philippians 3:4b-14; Matthew 21:33-46

You will have heard I'm sure, of the new minister appointed to a parish. On the first Sunday he preached a fine, somewhat challenging sermon, which many believed to his manifesto. On the second week he preached the same sermon, which many folks enjoyed, such was its nature. The third and fourth Sundays came and the same sermon was preached. Eventually one of the Churchwardens approached him and said, 'I know we asked for fine preaching in our parish profile, but there was an expectation of more than just one fine sermon,' to which the minister replied, 'well I'll keep preaching this one until you all listen!' A very brave and bold move in the Sir Humphrey Appleby way of understanding such things.

I am endeavouring such a feat today, in my own small way. Today (At 10am) we will sing the same hymn twice. It is a Latin hymn from the 7th century: *Ubrs beata Jerusalem*. It is generally translated as 'Blessed City Heavenly Salem.' We will sing two versions this morning to open and conclude our (10am) Eucharist: Christ is made our sure foundation and just to make the point, Christ is our cornerstone. They are from different translators with different meters and therefore different tunes.

Why twice? Because whatever we do here, whatever style of worship we adopt, whatever we choose to wear, it is all about Christ, the cornerstone, the foundation and us the living stones built on it and around it, we must never lose this vision. And today we are offered a very particular vision of this Christ in our readings, one which is crucial to our understanding of the person of Jesus. It is not altogether an easy-going vision. In the original Latin hymn we sing: *Many a blow and biting sculpture fashioned well those stones elect, in their places now compacted by the heavenly Architect*. This matter of being Christ-like involves a being sculpted, chiselled, it is not altogether a gentle process, there is an element of judgement which perhaps we would rather avoid. But fortunately, there is always more, in Christ there is always more.

In the job description of a prophet are two important elements: Criticism *and* Hope. On their own these two are easy; it is easy to be critical, granted it is less easy to be truly hopeful, but put the two together they present a real challenge. Today we are confronted with this prophetic imagination in our readings. The first, from Isaiah, is in the form of a love song. It begins sweetly enough as the prophet describes the wooing of the beloved, but it soon turns sour as that love is not reciprocated. Vines have been planted but, rather than produce sweet fruit the grapes are sour and as Jeremiah tells us, 'Our teeth are set on edge.' Isaiah this morning is critical, scathing even, of Israel and the Psalmist responds in a heartfelt plea: *Restore us again, O Lord of hosts: show us the light of your countenance, bestow your care upon this vine: the stock which your own right hand has planted*.

In the gospel today Jesus reminds the religious folk of his day of this passage from Isaiah. He turns it into a parable, and when they heard it, they realised he was speaking about them. This is Jesus as prophet, his criticism matches, if not surpasses, that of Isaiah, the tone of judgement is unmistakable. But there is more, Jesus hears the plea of Psalmist and responds using another Psalm – this stone which you have rejected is no more than the very cornerstone and this is a marvelous thing! In Hebrew son is Ben, stone is Eben the Chief priests and pharisees could not have failed to see what Jesus was saying! So, we sing this hymn twice because Jesus as God is the very cornerstone of everything and Jesus as prophet is indeed the epitome of both criticism and hope, both challenge and comfort. Jesus is *the* prophet, and clearly, he was recognized as such. His criticism was scathing, but *in* him is the embodiment of hope and so we turn to Paul and his letter to his beloved Philippians.

Paul is one of the tenants. He describes himself as such, and what resume it is, this is some CV! But Paul is saying something else here. It is very easy for us to speak of Jesus' criticism of the Pharisees and all the other folks that made up the religious landscape of the first century, but

Jesus was revealing through them the same fatal flaw that besets all of humanity. A rebelliousness, an unwillingness to give true worth to God and to that over which we have been given stewardship.

Whether the vineyard is the Church, or our nation or the entire created order, much has been leased to us as tenants, and yet we remain rebellious, unwilling to respond thankfully. Our Church, our nation, the creation stands at a crossroad. There is a sense of judgement, a calling to account for the way we have acted as stewards; despite prophetic voices of criticism, we have got things wrong. Paul uses an interesting word that doesn't appear in our translation; indeed, it only appears once in the New Testament, we have translated the word as rubbish, Paul probably meant dung! What we have relied on in the past is a load of....!

But of course, there is hope. Paul describes leaning into the future, realising that our goals are yet to be met. Knowing that we share our sufferings with those of Christ who has come into our vineyard as the last of the prophets and has been shamelessly treated, but whose life and message has been vindicated in the hope of the resurrection, which we also share.

So, we shall sing the same hymn twice, because if we recognize Christ as our cornerstone, all will be well. Yes, we have got things wrong, we have ignored those prophetic voices. But the prophet par excellence always offers hope, and this must be our way, as like Paul: 'forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead,' we seek out the future which is God in Christ. Amen.