

Vindication

Sermon for the 14th Sunday after Pentecost, Year A, 3 September 2023

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT AUSTRALIA

The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell

Jeremiah 15:15-21; Psalm 26:1-8; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28

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

It's a miserable thing to be attacked, accused, undermined, gossiped about and shamed, and all that when you're just trying to do your best and to do the right thing. All leaders have to deal with this. Our Psalm has a King praying for vindication in the face of all this, so that when he stands up in the temple the king's righteousness will be revealed before his accusers. In our Jeremiah passage today, a prophetic visionary laments this fate shared by so many of his kind and longs for vindication, but God's response to Jeremiah can only be described as tough love. He's told to stop whining and turn back to God, like he's telling everyone else to do, because there he'll find

the resilience and the cut-through that he needs. Today's many self-appointed prophets and pundits, who claim the mantle of affronted victimhood, should heed this advice—especially America's whining victim-in-chief with his imitators here and elsewhere.

For you and me in the Church perhaps all this will pass us by. But then Paul reminds us in Romans today that Church life provides ample opportunity to encounter struggle, persecution, enmity and curse. I met it when I was a parish priest and a theological college Principal, and I wasn't alone in that; lay people encounter it and are driven out of strife-torn parishes, while Australian bishops who stick their heads above the parapet on some controversial issue will face it; and if our Church in Australia had any theologians who anyone took any notice of, I'm sure they'd face it too.

But Paul's answer, like God's answer to Jeremiah, doesn't invite wallowing in disappointment and bitterness. Instead, we're called in our epistle today to cultivate a remarkable spirit of persevering

patience and love, taking seriously our status as a Church, as God's people called out to make a difference. And if we're inclined to rivalrous self-assertion, Paul tells us cheekily, then let that rivalry be about outdoing one another in showing honour.

As for the bit at the end of today's epistle about heaping hot coals on our rivals' heads, this isn't God's invitation to slip the knife in under cover of being nice. These hot coals point to the torment that our opponents experience when they're confronted by a counter narrative that they can't ignore or drown out with bluster—the sort of hot coals that an American white supremacist protester must have felt when he'd been knocked down and injured at a demo only to have a black man pick him up and carry him to safety. These are the hot coals of conversion that the loving patience of Christians can heap on the heads of implacable opponents, who can't fathom this evidence that it's possible to live and work by unimaginably different rules—that for us as Christians it's not tit for tat; it's not I win, you lose.

This is what love of enemies means. It's what can undo the reign of conspiracy theories and challenge the dreadful new world order of lies that's everywhere on the rise—and especially on social media, which one journalist I was reading during the week described as resembling a crowded and filthy public toilet.

And so to today's gospel, where Jesus sets his face toward Jerusalem. He begins to name the inescapable contest of ideas, and worse, that inevitably awaits him at the religio-political centre of things. And, equally inevitably, Peter puts his foot in it, declaring that Jesus must never be rolled over the top of in this way—that he must be vindicated. And then comes that great rebuke from Jesus to Peter: get behind me Satan, you are a stumbling block. Because of course that's what Satan is—the wrap-up of our whole human problem, which is needing to win and to control and to dominate and never to be on the losing side, which now finds itself embodied not in a horned man with a pitchfork but in just plain old Peter—or in the

Roman Christians to whom Paul writes, or in plain old you and me, whenever we become a stumbling block to Jesus's purposes.

And all of this is what Jesus renounces with unparalleled dramatic clarity on Good Friday. His cross is the opposite of what religion and wisdom and spirituality and common sense and market forces and all the rest of our most solemn guides in life could ever contemplate, yet there on Good Friday is where our God marks the only reliable path beyond humanity's perpetual kingdom of self-delusion.

And what about Jesus's vindication, which Peter desires for him?

Jesus announces it, certainly, declaring an apocalyptic reckoning in today's gospel, using the sort of language that bubbled up in Israel whenever secure and predictable historical outcomes were collapsing. Like hot coals on the head that Paul gives us in our epistle today, Jesus's threat of apocalypse and judgement has been read as God's payback, with so many human despots gleefully seeking a share in delivering this divine retribution. Even peace-talking

theologians like Miroslav Volf still hold out for this divine retribution, while smugly folding their hands and basking in an aura of Christian non-violence. But to me that treats God like a hit man, doing our dirty work for us. Accordingly, in a book review I once described Miroslav Volf as the Mel Gibson of Christian pacifism.

No, I think that Jesus uses the apocalyptic language of his day but turns it to a radical new end. I think that Easter is the great Christian apocalypse, a decisive end to one world at God's hands and the birth of a new creation. But what God brings is life, not death—the life that erupts from death on Easter Day to delete and replace a violent world's operating system ever after.

And as for divine judgement, it's this apocalypse, which is the bonfire of the vanities, which is the hot coals on the head, and it comes when a simple but shocking truth refused by the evil and by the comfortably-good can no longer be escaped: the simple but shocking truth that God is love, and so that through all their shabby, self-

justifying lives they've got everything wrong. This is why the Easter gospel of mercy and forgiveness brings apocalypse and hot coals for those who insist that they need no mercy and forgiveness. Jean-Jacques Rousseau was like that, which is why he resented the gospel, as do many of his ilk. This good news of God's grace is received as bad news by them—that is, by the proud and the self-righteous.

That's where the Roman Catholic idea of purgatory fits in, I think. Because for a lot of people it's going to take them a good while to get their head around this whole state-of-affairs before they're eventually able to experience God's loving presence as heaven rather than hell.

So, this ultimate revealing of God's love and mercy, erupting at Easter and handed on to you and me in the Church as our life's task, represents the ultimate judgement, the ultimate apocalypse. Every rubbish account of life and its meaning is put on notice. Hence, a line that I love to quote, from my friend the Polish Catholic theologian

Josef Niewiadomski, who wrote that God judges us by raising us from the dead.

Friends, if I'm right, if that's our joy and our consolation and our message as Christians, then we're going to face opposition as we seek to live accordingly, from outside the Church but occasionally from inside it too. But with that comes the promise of vindication and the resilience of Easter, with the invincible solidarity of the Eucharist, and the promise of heaven—the promise of a world judged, of its heart broken and then mended, of the world's ultimate liberation by love.

The Lord be with you...