

Freed from Anger and Resentment

Sermon for the 17th Sunday after Pentecost, Year A, 24 September 2023

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

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Jonah 3:10-4:3, Psalm 145:1-8, Philippians 1:21-30, Matthew 20:1-16

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

I want to talk to you today about being freed from anger and resentment, at a time when these are displacing cricket and football as our favourite national sports. And not just here, but in many places around the world—in the echo chambers of right wing and social media, and with the rise of authoritarian populism, all of which stokes and feeds on anger and resentment.

In our Old Testament reading we meet Jonah at his most angry and resentful. Ultimately, like so many others, Jonah resents God—the Lord who is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and of great goodness, as Jonah describes God in words echoed today by our Psalm. Indeed, Jonah even admits that this is why he originally fled to Tarshish by sea, to escape this generous God who was calling Jonah to a mission of mercy in Nineveh. But with Nineveh repentant and saved from its sins, Jonah's resentment boils over. He flounces off in a sulk, and he's so trapped in his own personal grievances that he laments the death of a shade tree without sparing a thought for the welfare of a whole city—all those pagans given a second chance, and even all those animals spared. Just like all those today who resent multiculturalism and environmentalism, who won't spare a thought for the pagans and the animals.

Today's gospel is also about the problem of anger and resentment. The poor day labourers end up resenting those among them who got

the same pay for doing less hours of work. And isn't that how it still works today? This has been called the narcissism of small differences. You mightn't resent the wealthy, but if someone close to you in class and income seems to be getting some relative advantage, anger and resentment typically follows. Why are they getting what I should be getting: immigrants for instance, along with black and brown people in America, taking what were once good and secure white jobs? Likewise, in Australia today we're hearing that everyone should be treated exactly the same, without some gaining special advantage through the Voice, but really this is about a fear of lost advantage, of diminishment—"they're coming for what's ours".

Once again, in these contemporary cases the anger and resentment is against any tendency towards generosity and goodness, and ultimately against God who calls out this envy over his generosity in today's Gospel—the God for whom the "deserving first" find themselves last while the "undeserving last" find themselves first. Because, in the grip of anger and resentment, whether its personal or political—either hard right or woke left—such generosity and goodness can't be tolerated.

But now we meet St Paul in our Epistle today, who embodies radical freedom from all such anger and resentment. He's in a Roman prison for his faith, yet he tells us that his witness to Christ has found its way through the whole Imperial Guard. Here, Paul reminds me of Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who ministered to his Gestapo jailers at Berlin's Tegel Prison, or Nelson Mandela, who befriended the prison guards on Robben Island and later invited them to his inauguration as President of South Africa. Nothing to prove, nothing to lose, and hence nothing to fear. Paul's like a Buddhist Bodhisattva—the one who's ready to enter Nirvana but who stays behind to help others on their path to enlightenment. Paul knows that he's held tight forever in the love of Christ, so that whether he lives or dies is not of great consequence—in the words of that hymn,

Death will come one day to me;
Jesu, cast me not from thee:
dying let me still abide
in thy heart and wounded side

And this freedom, this resilience, gave Paul the prisoner an advantage over his opponents. Indeed, he tells us today that this Christian capacity to master anxiety and fear is evidence of his opponent's destruction, and likewise of our salvation. In other words, it shows that we've got the better of scarcity, insecurity and bitterness; that we've overcome the world of which these are the foundations; that we've been saved from all that torments and preoccupies those who Paul who calls our opponents.

Because, friends, life doesn't have to be about anger and resentment which are based ultimately on fear of loss. Putin, Russia's self-appointed Czar, fears and resents the rise of democratic sentiment in his country, so he stages a proxy war against the West in Ukraine. Trump fears and resents those in America who don't believe it's all about winning and proving your superiority, and who want to help others, so that their faith and values have to be mocked and torn down. And, of course, there are the shrill advocates of anger and resentment in our own Voice debate, so scared of what might happen that they'll spread all the disinformation and stoke all the fears that they can. But, as Paul shows us, as the generous vineyard owner in today's Gospel shows us, and as Jonah is patiently shown by his frustratingly generous God, this is not how the world actually is, and this isn't how life has to be.

But let's not forget that God doesn't hate Jonah. Again and again God calls, helps, and makes use of Jonah, for all his obvious imperfections. And so too with us. We don't have to be fully sorted out and never prone to a moment of anger and resentment before God can call and send us, but we do have to be on the path of conversion. The generous spirit of the Gospel, of baptism and its cleansing flood and of the Eucharist is balm for the wounded soul,

massaging the tension out of our cramped muscles and helping us to loosen up in life. So even if we're critical of others we never give up on them, and especially in the Church where things and people may not always be to our liking.

And one last thing: this can be a particular challenge when we'll soon be getting used to a potentially long-term locum priest and eventually to a new Rector. This is a time in every parish when anxieties can multiply and nerves can be on edge—a time when we should all pray for a share of St Paul's calm resilience, and a renewed appreciation of God's generosity.

The Lord be with you ...