

Understanding God's Outreach

Sermon for the 3rd Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B, 21 January 2024

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

The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell

Jonah 3:1-10; Psalm 62:5-12; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20

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

At a time when our parish council is thinking about outreach in the local community and beginning to plan for it, it's timely that today's readings in this Epiphany season remind us what God's outreach looks like, and how we the Church are part of it.

For Jonah and the people of Nineveh, God's outreach to a city bent on self-destruction brought a prophetic warning and then a merciful deliverance. This is very relevant when our world is facing the prospect of escalating war between stubborn players in the middle East, the worsening political insanity of America, and the slow-burn of our worldwide climate crisis, all of which elicit prophetic challenges from God for the sake of a world that God loves.

For the people of Israel addressed in our psalm today, God's outreach invites trust, pointing beyond the anxious scarcity mentality that leads so many to seek their own advantage at others' expense—as the palmist puts it, by extortion and robbery. Here's an invitation not just to the criminally inclined but to price-gouging supermarkets, and all who live to feather their own nests in the worlds of business and finance.

Paul in today's epistle makes a similar point but here he's specifically addressing the Church. While our feet are in the earthly city and we can't escape that, as St Augustine reminds us, nevertheless our heads need to be in the heavenly city, where we see the world and its priorities from God's vantage point—where we discover a different set of priorities for our life in the earthly city, and some detachment from its agenda of look good, feel good and make good. Once, texts like today's epistle pointed Christians to the monastery, though for today's worldly middle-class protestants—who've long abandoned what David Hume called the monkish virtues—it's harder to see what Paul would have us do. Perhaps it's enough to remember that this worldly life with its comforts and its markers of success is interrupted by God's outreach and called into question, not to be abandoned necessarily but certainly to be relativised. After all, our whole civilization will have to face such challenges if a climate crisis is to be averted—root and branch challenges to our economies, our governments, our societies and our accustomed ways of life.

All this comes to a head in our gospel today as Jesus begins to gather his forces. Here God's outreach to the world finds a face and a name in Jesus Christ. But it's not Christ as an individual but Christ as the head of a growing body, the Church. It's customary in Protestant thinking to separate Christ and the Church, and to see the Church as something that Christians do—as a social contract between individual Christians, with ordained ministry seen in largely functional terms. Yet in today's Gospel God's outreach through Jesus Christ summons a Church with a mission to fish for people, to carry God's outreach evangelistically so that people are won over and their lives made one with Christ, sharing his vision, in the company of his people and serving his cause. And what's more, this is an apostolic Church from the start, as Jesus begins summoning his apostles and training them to be leaders of his mission. From the start, then,

Jesus didn't just summon individuals. Instead, he drew a new community together around the core group of his apostles.

So, friends, when we think of God's outreach we remember that God is doing this, and enlisting us, and that the agenda is God's first and foremost: to warn, to confront a divided world with the shocking truth of mercy and forgiveness, to be fishers for Christ, to be a community marching to a different drummer, and to know ourselves as an apostolic movement, not a well-intentioned community group. Surely there are enough of those. What there isn't enough of is the witness we can bring if we know who we are in Jesus Christ and what we're about. This comes as our imaginations are forged over time in the Eucharist—here we discover ourselves as citizens of the heavenly city, though called for now to make our stand in the earthly one.

The Lord be with you ...