

## Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

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*Rector of St James*

**Pentecost 7**

**11 July 2021**

**Readings:**            2 Samuel 6: 1-5, 12b-19;            Psalm 24;  
                             Ephesians 1: 1-14;                 Mark 6: 14-29.

### *“Preaching Good News?”*

#### **Interpreting the Scriptures**

There is a process that takes place in the development of a sermon.

First is the activity of looking at the text and drawing out its meaning. The technical term for this activity is *exegesis*, and it involves evaluating and contextualising what was written. In this respect, we look at the provenance of the text, investigate its historical, cultural, and social context, its literary genre, and any apparent theological themes that the writer is presenting. A reliable commentary on the text is therefore very helpful in this phase of interpretation.

The second thing is to grapple with the ideas that lie behind the text – a **critical review** if you like. While the words have meaning in themselves, there are also philosophical and theological ideas that underpin what is written. In this respect, we ask ‘what were the ideas of the day that caused the writer to express themselves in this particular way?’ The challenge here is that the understandings that people had in the ancient world can be very different from those we have today. A simplistic literal reading of the text is therefore likely to lead us astray!

Finally is the task of **application**, which involves the question ‘what is God trying to tell us through this text and how might our lives be changed by it?’ This is the time to consider the contemporary context and the issues of the day. This final part of the process approaches the matter of **revelation** through which we seek to grow in our knowledge of God and ourselves through the Scriptures. It is an activity that needs prayer, contemplation, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Having done these things, the sermon may then be drafted.

## A Gospel of Joy and Hope

So, what may be discovered in today's texts? As it is, there are many themes upon which I might have preached today.

The reading from the **Second Book of Samuel** describes King David bringing the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem. It is an important moment in the narrative of the Israelite people when both the kingly and religious centres of power were centralised in Zion, thereby becoming the place where God resided on earth – at least until the Exile!

The narrative says that David was overjoyed by the moment and 'danced before the Lord' in little more than his underwear! And well may he be happy, for he had gained much power and status by bringing the Ark to Jerusalem, but his wife Michal (daughter of the king that David had replaced) was unimpressed. It was a portent of the chaotic court history that was to follow – a time when absolute power corrupted absolutely; but that is another story.

The text at this point is about the joy and blessing that comes from being in the presence of God. So, I could have preached about this today.

In a similar manner, **Psalm 24** recounts the grandeur and might of God. The lectionary has linked it to the story of the Ark entering Jerusalem because it is a liturgical poem or song about going up to Zion, or the 'hill of the Lord'. It therefore resonates with the story of the Ark.

The Psalm proclaims: 'The Lord is strong and mighty; the Lord is mighty in battle'. So, I could have preached about God's power and linked it with the victory of Christ on the cross, rather than the story of the people of Judah defeating their enemies!

The reading from the **Letter to the Ephesians** has some other challenges. It is not a narrative, but rather an argument with a little bit of poetry thrown in. Nevertheless, it presents a gospel theme of hope in what was often a violent and disempowering society for those on the fringes. So, Paul wrote about how humanity relates to God and of God's gracious activity in the world to bring salvation and new life to all.

There are several theological themes present in this passage such as: adoption, redemption, and forgiveness, that give expression to different aspects of God activity toward humanity:

- **Adoption** tells of our status as children of God, thereby sharing in the resurrection of Christ, which is our inheritance,
- **Redemption** is a process by which God acts to 'buy back' humanity through the death of Jesus. In this respect Jesus died, but overcame death and rose to new life, so that we may do likewise, and finally

- **Forgiveness** of sin and brokenness, which is what God gives to humanity so that we may be transformed into the people that God wants us to be.

The message here is that God loves us, reaches out to us, and brings us into a set of loving relationships, both divine and human; and I could have easily preached on this theme today.

The reading from the **Gospel of Mark** is a little more problematical. It is a story of the consequences of speaking truth to power. The narrative of the death of John the Baptist is an insertion into the gospel narrative (a story within a story) and prefigures the death of Jesus, who also spoke the truth to power.

In the story, King Herod Antipas threw a birthday party for himself. As expected, it involved the usual display of wealth and power. His stepdaughter danced for the men at the banquet and the King, probably full of drink and high spirits, offered the girl anything she wanted as a reward for entertaining them.

In response, and after consultation with her mother, she asked for the death of John the Baptist - one for whom she and her mother had great hatred. The reason for this was that John had criticised Herod for having married his brother's wife (similar to King Henry VIII), thereby committing adultery. Neither the daughter nor the mother forgave their perceived enemy and John was beheaded, demonstrating once again that absolute power corrupts absolutely.

It might, therefore, have been tempting to preach on the idea of speaking truth to power and the use of violence to silence the powerless – it is, after all, a perpetual theme in human history.

As can be seen, there is a feast of topics and ideas in today's readings; these range from the joy that comes when one is in God's presence, to the saving power of God, to God's love for all people expressed through Christ, and finally to God overcoming the power of earthly rulers and the establishment of God's Kingdom on earth. Any of these might have served my purpose, but I have chosen to set them all aside because there is something going wrong in our church that betrays these gospel themes.

### **Good News for Whom?**

The church is in the business of proclaiming good news, of teaching and nurturing faith in Jesus Christ, of worshipping God, of caring for and serving one another, and of being a means to bring God's unconditional love to all people. We do this in the context of a community that is wide and diverse which has been called and blessed by God. In short, this is God's work, not ours, and in this respect the church is a means not an end.

Sadly, in the past week I read, yet again, of people who have been called by God being excluded by the institutional church. I refer to the same-sex married couple at St Mary's Church, West Armidale.

I do not know the people involved, but media reports say that they are legally married yet have been told to separate by both the Bishop and Dean of Armidale if they wish to be members of the church. In fact, it sounds as though they have been told to break the law by separating, because their marriage has not broken down irretrievably.

My problem is that there is no good news here, no joy, no grace, no redemption, no recognition that this couple are part of God's family. What we seem to have is an assertion of power and of law – that is church law, not the law of the land. And where is grace to be seen in this ham-fisted behaviour? Unfortunately, in this instance the church is behaving more like an exclusive club than a community.

So rather than the texts at hand, I have chosen to preach about this matter instead. Why preach from the Scriptures if the church does not practice what they say?

In various times and places down through history, the institutional church has excluded or disregarded people; which includes people of different races, cultures and religions; slaves; women; people who are divorced; people who do not fit into the religious tribe by 'believing or doing particular things'; and of course LGBTIQ+ people. On occasions, exclusion has segued into persecution and violence, which is a product of the abuse of power usually given to the church by the state. Examples include the Crusades and the Inquisition.

I fear that the exclusion we are seeing in Armidale is, to a lesser degree, the emerging face of abuse that will come under so called 'religious freedom legislation' being sought nationally by some religious lobby groups. In this case, it gives power and privilege to institutions and their leaders but not to people. We, the church, do not need such religious privilege, which only provides good news to religious functionaries but disempowers ordinary people of faith!

God's people should behave differently from the world of realpolitik, and it is for this reason that the needs of the people should take precedence over the needs of the institution.

Perhaps it is time for another Reformation?!