

Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

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Rector of St James

Sunday Before Lent

(Transfiguration)

27 February 2022

“Hearing, Seeing, Believing, and Responding”

Readings: Exodus 34:29-35; Psalm 99; 2 Corinthians 3:12–4:2; Luke 9:28-36.

Salvation History

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light.
(Genesis 1:1-3)

The opening words of the Bible describe God creating the world through the act of speaking. On each day of creation God speaks and things happen. A similar mood is to be found in the opening words of the Gospel of John:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.
(John 1:1-2)

Whereas Genesis refers to the actions of God’s reason bringing about the creation of the world, John’s Gospel instead refers to the existence of God’s word (or logos) from the beginning being now present in Jesus the Messiah. It suggests that God acted to create the world on the one hand, and that God acted to enter that world on the other. Both may be described as profound moments of God’s action in time.

The Scriptures describe many occasions when God speaks in moments of transformation or by exhortation of humanity to return to faithfulness and justice. What the Bible describes is a God who is not remote or unknowable, but rather one who engages with humanity. This profound and ongoing engagement is part of what is known theologically as **salvation history**.

The book Exodus is a narrative about one of the most important moments in Hebrew salvation history. It involved the release of God’s people from slavery, their receiving of the Law, and their entering the promised land. It is a story about God’s calling, redemption, providence, and blessing, which provides a basis for later theological narratives including the gospels. Today’s first reading recounts part of the Exodus story - the receiving of the Law at Mount Sinai by Moses.

Judaic Law was foundational for the people of God because it was understood as being God's word on how humanity is meant to live. In time the Law was extended, as seen in the other books Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. The first five books of the Bible came to be known as '**The Law**' (or **Torah**) and provided the basis for the ordering of Hebrew society.

But of course, the story of God's people did not end there. What followed was the working out of the Law in society. Sometimes the people of God kept the Law and so justice and goodness prevailed, but at other times the people rebelled, disobeyed the Law, and suffered the consequences. God then spoke again through the **Prophets**.

Normally, a prophet called the people back to lives of righteousness and justice. In this way the prophets became the voice of God; calling, exhorting, and warning. It was a ministry picked up by St Paul and continues as part of the church today.

In the Hebrew world, God spoke and things happened. And so the Law and the Prophets drove salvation history forward.

Lifting the Veil

The coming of God's anointed one into the world in Jesus is, for Christians, the foundational moment of God's word and action in the world. The coming of Christ was another turning-point in salvation history and took the story of God's people to a new dimension.

St Paul argued that the Law and the Prophets, despite being God's revelation to humanity, did not seem to change anything in the long run. Humans continued to be sinful, self-centred, and violent toward one another – such as we see today in Ukraine and the numerous other troubled places in the world.

What St Paul proposed was not the application of more rules and regulations, but rather a spiritual solution that changed the heart. It was a matter of hearing God's word and seeing God's action through the revelation that God's Spirit provided. To achieve this people needed to end the 'old ways' and look at and listen to Jesus, the model or template of what it is to be a person filled with the Spirit of God.

Jesus took with him Peter, John, and James and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him.
(Luke 9: 28-30)

The story of the Transfiguration makes an obvious connection with the time that Moses received the Law – the mountain, the shining face, and even the appearance of Moses made this clear - but to it is added the presence of the prophet Elijah. So, the Law and the Prophets meet with Jesus and a new era is heralded by the voice: “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!”. Here the voice of God resonates with that at the Baptism of Jesus, which is a theme in the Gospel.

In this way Luke, the Gospel writer, heralded a new epoch in salvation history. The Law and the Prophets (personified in Moses and Elijah) gave way to Jesus the Christ (God’s word and action present in humanity).

St Paul described this revelation as being like the lifting of a veil from our eyes. What was once hazy and indistinct became clear to those who looked to Jesus to understand what it is to be a human filled with the Holy Spirit. But is that it? How do we hear God’s voice in our own times?

So, Is That It?

Some Christians argue that God’s word and actions are confined to the New Testament era of Jesus and the early Church. Such a view emphasises the **Bible** as not only a religious document, but more particularly as the only word (or revelation) from God to his people. It therefore restricts God’s speaking to the words of the book and the reactions of the reader.

Of course, the Scriptures are a primary and necessary part of God’s revelation that Christians need to look to for an understanding of the faith. Nevertheless, a more general view extends the period of revelation to include the early church fathers and the ecumenical councils - say up to the seventh or eighth centuries. This is the period when orthodoxy of belief was established, and also when the church became the state religion of the Roman Empire. It was therefore the time when many **traditions** of the church were formed, both theological and functional.

Nevertheless, there are others who argue that God’s revelation is not restricted in any way but rather progresses in our own time. This view gives recognition of our **experiences** of God in the present, and is a sentiment picked up in the words of the nineteenth century English Congregationalist, George Rawson, in his hymn:

*We limit not the truth of God
To our poor reach of mind,
By notions of our day and sect,
Crude, partial and confined.
Now let a new and better hope
Within our hearts be stirred:
The Lord hath yet more light and truth
To break forth from His Word.*

Ongoing revelation reflects a classical Anglican position regarding how we hear and understand God's presence. It recognises the primacy of the **Scriptures**, but also accepts that **reason, tradition, and experience** have parts to play both in the business of Biblical interpretation as well as theological reflection. It goes on to inform us of how we are to behave both individually and corporately.

St Paul contends, and I am inclined to agree, that personal **conscience** plays a vital part in moral decision making. To be sure, conscience or 'moral compass' is a way of hearing the voice of God. It also encourages us to act for the common good.

How Are We To Live?

Finally, I provide a recent case-study of the business of listening for God's voice. Last Tuesday the St James' Institute and Affinity Intercultural Foundation conducted a roundtable discussion on the treatment of refugees and asylum seekers in Australia. It brought together a group of subject matter experts and practitioners to discuss the legal, ethical, and moral aspects of government policy.

The session started with a quote from the book Leviticus:

When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

(Leviticus 19:33-34)

Our current situation in Australia is perplexing in this regard for there are those who claim to be 'of faith' yet also seem to be reluctant to acknowledge the strangers in our midst, let alone love them as themselves.

It also seems that Australia is not meeting its obligations to refugees and asylum seekers under international law, let alone what might be understood as natural rights or even God's demands. As a nation we did well in accepting Vietnamese refugees because of our involvement in a failed war, but recently we seem to be reluctant and clumsy in our response to Afghan refugees. I wonder how we will treat Ukrainians in the current circumstances.

What are we to do? We have moments into only in which to 'welcome the stranger in our land' but also to consider changes to our national conversation on this matter, and I hope that God might speak to us about it. The Bible seems to be clear, while Jesus himself spoke of 'welcoming the stranger' (Matthew 25: 35) – that's if we choose to listen to him. Likewise, if we apply the concepts of natural justice and compassion we would act more positively toward the refugee.

God has spoken; the challenge for us is to hear and respond.