

Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

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Evensong

St James Apostle and Martyr

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“Faith, Context and the Way”

Readings: Psalm 7; Jeremiah 26: 1-16; Mark 1: 1-16.

Decontextualization and Context

Nine years ago our daughter Kate was preparing to sit her HSC exams. Foolishly, I decided to help with her preparations for English. I long had an interest in the works of Shakespeare and especially his historical dramas, so I thought we should start there.

“What is the context in which Shakespeare wrote?” I asked. “Who was Shakespeare; for whom did he write; and what was the social, political, and cultural situation of his day?”

“I can’t say.” was Kate’s reply.

“What do you mean you can’t say? You can’t understand Shakespeare without understanding the context in which he wrote!” I retorted.

“That may be the case,” she responded, “but if I write about context in the exam they will fail me.”

“What nonsense is this?” I said.

To which she said, “We mustn’t write about context, we have to write about how we ‘feel’ about the play in terms of ‘belonging’.”

I was gobsmacked. What sort of post-modern nonsense was this? Sure, we bring meaning to the text but there is much more to be gained from it when we let the text speak to us through its context – no matter how partial and confined our understanding of it might be.

For instance, Henry V is a rattling good yarn, but there are depths to it that go beyond the psychology of a great leader – “we few, we happy few, we band of brothers...,” and ending with the inevitable hero’s love story. That view is well and good, and one could write a great deal about how one ‘feels’ about it, but there is more to the play than that.

Henry V was written late in the reign of Queen Elizabeth during a time of disquiet about the future of the Tudor reign and coupled with the ever-present prospect of war. Shakespeare was not a good historian but tended to take a historical story and shape it to his own ends.

Henry V begins with a discussion between the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of Ely concerning the retention of church property against the parliament that desired to confiscate it – some things never change. The Archbishop presented a cunning plan that would distract the parliament and provide the King with great wealth; this was the proposed invasion of France. In this way, Shakespeare sets the stage for the story of the Battle of Agincourt, and a metanarrative concerning the supremacy of Britain over France – it was a ‘land of hope and glory’ moment!

The second feature is that the play seeks to convince people of Henry’s Welsh ancestry through an interaction with a Welsh soldier, Fluellen. There is no historical evidence for it, but it was good propaganda in support of the Tudor dynasty’s claim to the throne. Shakespeare created a similar pro-Tudor piece of propaganda in his play Richard III.

Justifying claims to land ownership and supporting the ruling dynasty were important underlying cultural issues of the day that provided the context to drive the play to its conclusion.

Hermeneutics

What I am touching on in this sermon is the discipline of hermeneutics, or the process of interpreting texts. It is an important process in the business of literary criticism, the reading of history, the interpretation of the law, and of course Biblical analysis.

Indeed, governments have sometimes enacted statutes to guide the courts in the process of interpreting acts of parliament. The purpose of these ‘interpretation acts’ is to decrease a literalistic interpretation of the law and support a more purposive approach. Likewise, military doctrine has a term called ‘Commanders Intent’ that describes the mission and end-state regarding an operation. It is important because written orders can be misinterpreted on the one hand or slavishly obeyed on the other to the extent that the goals are not achieved.

The sixteenth century English theologian Richard Hooker proposed three principles to be used in the formulation of doctrine and the operation of the church; they are ‘reason,’ ‘tradition’ and ‘Scripture.’ These are hermeneutical ‘keys,’ used to unlock not only the meaning of a Biblical text but also the development of theology and church practice. Today, the business of hermeneutics may include historical analysis, textual criticism, semiotics, and a broad understanding of science and culture. To be credible it needs to be multi-disciplinary, engaged with the community, and open to criticism.

Herein lies a problem for the church. Since the early twentieth century, some religious groups have reacted to the growing knowledge base of the physical sciences leading to rejection of a critical approach to the interpretation of the Bible and Christian theology. It has given rise to 'Biblical literalism', which rejects the application of a broad analysis of the texts and a progressive scientific understanding of the world in which we live. Biblical literalism began with Christian fundamentalism in the United States and has often paired itself with theological dogmatism since.

Extreme examples of this phenomena are exemplified by beliefs in 'seven-day creation,' the historical facticity of the existence of two humans called 'Adam and Eve,' and a 'literal flood that covered the whole earth' - to name but a few. More moderate views may accept these things as myth but are still troubled by criticisms of beliefs concerning the virgin birth, the miracles of Jesus, and the resurrection.

In philosophical terms, this rejection of critical analysis becomes a matter of 'special pleading' where criticism is ignored and there is an underlying desire to be given 'special treatment,' even if things do not make sense nor are morally justified. This was a problem with the recently proposed religious discrimination legislation.

The difficulty with literalism remains with us and has caused the Bible to be decontextualised by some adherents of the faith. This results in parts of the Bible being applied out of context and without reference to the prevailing customs and ideas of the times in which the texts were written - a triumph of ideology over wisdom!

Often this is done for the purpose of either protecting institutional authority or to influence social policy. It is seen historically by past support for colonialism, slavery, and apartheid; or in rampant sectarianism and ethnic rivalry; or in the poor treatment of first nations peoples. It continues in parts of the church today with discriminatory views about women in leadership; marriage and divorce; and the status of LGBTQI people.

We need context when reading the Bible and therefore should be asking questions such as: 'Who was Paul; to whom did he write; why did he write; what was the social, political, and cultural context of his own time and how did it influence his ideas?' We could also ask more testing questions such as 'Did Paul think he was principally writing religious doctrine in his letters or was he giving practical advice?' and 'To what extent did the prevailing Jewish, Stoic and Epicurean philosophies of the day influence Paul's ideas, and are these relevant today?' And so the exercise goes on.

A challenge for Christianity in our own times, likely to be reflected in the recent census results, is the intellectual and emotional dissonance created by a literalist and/or dogmatic understanding of the foundation of the Christian faith. Much of the time it is centred on the status, interpretation, and understanding of the Bible and the institutional church. What we need is a different way of approaching the Bible that allows the text to speak to us without the requirement for intellectual preconceptions that are untenable. It is for this reason that Biblical criticism (including context) needs to be taken seriously.

Contextualisation and Mission

Inasmuch as texts have a context, so to do we. The hermeneutics of suspicion coined by Paul Ricœur (1913-2005) and developed by Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) encourages us to look at the balance between ‘explanation’ and ‘understanding’ in texts, and to ask the question ‘who implicitly benefits or loses’ because of the narrative. Likewise, we need to be aware of the preconceptions and meanings we apply to a narrative as we engage with it, thereby finding in it what we want and ignoring those things that are inconvenient. All of this has an impact on how we think and behave.

One of the strengths of the Christian faith through history has been its capacity to adapt to diverse cultures while also bringing about change. A good example of this is on our own doorstep with the Melanesian church, and even more specifically the Torres Strait, where Christianity was eagerly adopted, indigenised, and became a transforming power in the community for good. This is because the Christian narrative (or Gospel) was presented in both a comprehensible and tangible way.

This has been a familiar story in many parts of the world, but it does bring with it a resulting diversity of ideas and practices that can bring inter-cultural conflict. We are seeing this in the Anglican Church now as the anti-colonial African churches clash with the post-colonial English and American churches. Sadly, it has now become a matter of speaking past each other with megaphones! We can only pray for the Lambeth Conference that begins this week where the tensions will be on display.

Another good aspect of the Christian faith has been its ability to change itself over time and either adapt or champion new ways of living in community. While some parts of the church condoned slavery other parts opposed it, while some parts supported apartheid other parts opposed it, while some parts are aggressively sectarian others are ecumenical, and so on. There remains, however, many opportunities to progress the transformation of people and society today – for ‘there is yet more light and truth to break forth from God’s word.’

The Way

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, ‘Follow me and I will make you fish for people.’ And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

(Mark 1: 16-20)

You will note from the text that there was no religious test for Jesus' apostles; they were called and chose to follow. What the followers of Jesus did was to take upon themselves the ministry of Jesus by deciding to embrace it, even though they did not understand where it was leading nor had they any control over it. They simply chose to be part of the journey.

If we want to bring life to the Christian faith in our own context we need to do likewise. It is not about seeking power over others but rather giving power away and being vulnerable – what Jesus meant by being a servant or slave to others. It is not so much about believing and doing the right things as seeking to follow the way of Christ by choosing to live his life through ours – which is what we theologically call 'incarnation.'

It will always be a journey (or pilgrimage) of discipleship and transformation, where we live 'in the moment' with our whole being – mind, body, and soul. This is a moment of honesty and integrity in which we admit our own short-comings and seek wholeness-of-being through open engagement and enquiring minds with the context about us.

This is what we have sought to do at St James' Church and is a reason that you are here today. Our context surrounds us, and you are part of it. The mission of our church is therefore not about who is in and who is out, nor is it to be a club or political party. It is about welcome and hospitality in the context of a wider community, and where together we journey in pilgrimage toward the Kingdom of God.

As the poet T S Eliot wrote:

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*

(Little Gidding, 1942)