

Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

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Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

(NAIDOC Sunday)

'A New Creation is Everything'

7 July 2019

Readings: 2 Kings 5: 1-14; Psalm 30;
 Galatians 6: 7-18; Luke 10: 1-11, 16-20.

A basic premise of the Christian faith is that there is something wrong with the world and that something needs to be done about it. This is a call for human transformation and renewal. On the other hand, if you desire to avoid change, or are not interested in justice, or if you wish to control things that are going on around you because you fear what might happen if you don't, then you are in the wrong religion. Let me tell you why. But first we need to take a journey to an ancient land and encounter the people there.

Galatia and the Galatians

Galatia was located in the centre of what is modern Turkey. It was named after a group of Gauls (or Celts) that settled there in the 3rd century BC. It was incorporated into the Roman Empire in 25 BC becoming an administrative province, although the people there retained a unique Celtic cultural identity until the second century AD.

The Apostle Paul wrote his letter to the Christians in Galatia around the late 40s AD and it was addressed to several churches located in the province. His principal concern was about the inclusion of new Gentile Christians into the faith, arguing that they were not to be subject to the requirements of the Mosaic law. The letter includes some of Paul's most robust writings about Christian freedom, Christian independence from Judaism, and an equalitarian social policy that challenged what was understood to be the then 'natural order of things'. The people of God were to be a new creation – an opportunity for God to fix what is wrong with the world.

Paul wrote:

"We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law."

(Galatians 2: 15-16)

and then this most radical understanding of human society:

“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise.”
(Galatians 3: 28-29)

and finally, about freedom:

“For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.” (Galatians 5:13-15)

Paul’s mission, through his preaching, teaching and leadership, was to seek to change the human world. He approached this in several ways, including changing the understanding we have of how to relate to God and each other, and also of how we understand ourselves as agents of God in the world. Three things arise from his letter:

1. Paul set aside the requirement for adherence to the Law and instead said that we should take on the nature of Christ. In other words, affirming the primacy of love over the law - goodbye Leviticus and Deuteronomy, hello grace and hospitality.
2. He also affirmed that the normal social distinctions between people, especially of class, race and sex, no longer applied in God’s family the church. We are all equal within our diversity.
3. He also called us to recognise our freedom; however, this is not a freedom to be self-indulgent or self-important but rather to serve one another in love. In my view, this was a freedom that was greatly diminished by the establishment of the church under Constantine, when it received earthly power and status.

Paul’s ideas were radical in his own time, and where they were practiced the early church brought light and hope into a world of abuse and injustice. This is the gospel in action – a gospel that brings about change, healing and renewal – that rejoices in humanity being a new creation. St Paul concludes his letter in the words we heard today:

“Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit. So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up.”
(Galatians 6: 7-9)

This is also a reminder for us, as God’s people, to take responsibility for our actions and to seek the common good rather than act out of greed or selfishness, or from a desire to have power over others, or from defensiveness driven by our fears of losing control. We reap what we sow. And what might we sow?

Embracing the Indigenous Narrative of Australia

At Evensong last Sunday we celebrated the Coming of the Light – a remembrance of the Christian missionaries that brought the gospel to the people of the Torres Strait. The gospel message was readily welcomed and integrated into the customs of the Islanders, as it was also more broadly by the Melanesian people in the Pacific. For them it was not so much about becoming like westerners as having the gospel indigenised and related through their own stories. It is similar to what I heard at a conference in New Zealand recently where it became apparent that success in mission was to be found through the development of equal relationships with the Maori and Polynesian people rather than through the application of correct doctrine and practice across these cultures.

Not all nineteenth century missions, however, were so successful. Indeed, the worst type of missionary work in those days was where the church acted as an arm of colonialism and western cultural imperialism. These missions tended to fail.

I wonder if we sometimes seem to be missing the vital relational ingredients in the mission of the churches in Australia. Too often there seems to be an obsession in some places with getting people to ‘believe the right things’ and ‘do the right things’. This is not salvation by grace but rather the promotion of salvation by works, or the Law. This is because it is focussed on what we do for God rather than what God does for us. It is exactly the opposite of what St Paul wrote to the Galatians.

In contrast, a church that emphasises grace will also give a priority to love and relationships. A church that emphasises love and relationships would seek to rejoice in the diversity of its peoples and welcome all regardless of difference. Moreover, such a church would not seek to play power games or politicise the Christian faith in an effort to gain control over others. In this regard, our Anglican Church has often failed, and continues to do so when it puts law above grace. Whoever has ears to hear let them hear!

More particularly on this NAIDOC Sunday, I am aware of how we have failed to have a dynamic relationship with our indigenous brothers and sisters. We are yet to explore together in a general and serious way a spirituality that is grounded in the land that we inhabit. A relational approach to salvation and being church might help us to see things differently as we look toward each other as well as the natural world around us.

The strength of Christian mission from the time of Jesus and St Paul and down through history has been its capacity to localise and reinterpret itself in different places and times. This happens when we understand that the faith is more about relationships and not about dogma. Yes, there is something wrong about the world and we need to do something about it; and it happens when we are willing to change both in ourselves as well as by being a catalyst for change in the world around us.

It is time for us to engage with the indigenous narrative of the world and seek the presence of Christ in its midst.

Lambs in the Midst of Wolves

The Gospel reading tells of how Jesus sent out seventy of his disciples into the world to preach the gospel. He described their sending out as being like 'lambs in the midst of wolves'. Travel light he said, act humbly but with courage. In their powerlessness they discovered power, not of their own, but of God; and in response, Jesus had a vision of the end of evil and the triumph of the good.

As I have said in the past, the church would do well to rethink its current mission. The Christian faith no longer dominates Australian society as it once did, and we continue to experience internal divisions and tribalism, hubris and desire to control social policy, and a propensity to make exclusive and self-referential claims to the truth, all of which adds further to the church's marginalisation in society.

At no point in the Bible are the followers of Jesus called to go out and dominate others. The mission of the church is to be carried out through service and a good example rather than through rules and regulations. In this respect, Christ gives us freedom; but it is freedom to engage and act, not to play either the bully or the victim.

Christian mission is not about power, it is about service through love. It is about recognition of human brokenness and the need for God in our lives. Finally, it is about making right what is wrong in the world and bringing peace instead of conflict – such a new creation is everything.