

Sensible Radicalism

Sermon for the 18th Sunday after Pentecost, Year C, 13 October 2019
St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

Jeremiah 29: 1, 4-7; Psalm 66; 2 Timothy 2: 8-15; Luke 17: 11-19

The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell

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

It's good to be back at St James' and as ever I thank Fr Andrew for his welcome invitation. And it's particularly good on a Sunday when my old friend and yours, Deacon Kate Ross, makes her first appearance here in Holy Orders.

Friends, today's readings confront us with what we might call a sensible radicalism. Just as Greta Thunberg had to go to New York, and to the United Nations, so Jesus had to go to Jerusalem, to the Temple, and today's Gospel tells us that that's where he's headed. Jerusalem is of course the big apple, and its Temple is the epicentre of a whole religious and social system. Here is where status is measured, where insiders hold tight to power and outsiders want in, where peace with the powers that be is preserved by not letting anyone rock the boat—just like New York, really, or Sydney ... or Canberra.

Jesus is of course a stirrer, though he's not a revolutionary. He's non-violent, and he doesn't hate the system. He just thinks that we can reimagine the system, and make it work better for all of us, so that the age-old game of thrones can be left behind, outgrown, and so that peace can be attained and preserved without scapegoats—without there always needing to be someone to blame, and someone to unload on.

Jesus knows that he'll come up against it in Jerusalem, in a symbolic struggle with the status quo. Too holy for the mob and not holy enough for the religious leaders, too conservative for the progressives and too progressive for the conservatives, as Hans Küng described him, Jesus will cause a crisis for the system. And in letting it roll over the top of him on Good Friday, Jesus will begin to undo the system, to loosen it up, to reveal the dirty secrets of its structural violence, hence to awaken its better angels and hopefully recall it to its best self. Easter is about God liberating and saving the world—about setting the world free from all the anxiety, envy, rivalry and violence that make the world go round.

So here's Jesus' plan, and in today's Gospel, on his way to that fateful encounter in Jerusalem, we come across this highly symbolically charged little scene, given to us as a kind of foretaste. Now, this isn't a story about miraculous cures that might strain your scientifically-

minded credulity, leaving you dismissive and unmoved. Instead, we need to read this story of a miraculous healing symbolically, recalling that being a leper in that society—in all pre-modern societies—meant being a feared outsider. It is, if you like, a social disease, and today's equivalent in terms of the outsider status it confers would be to have HIV/AIDS.

Jesus' gesture of compassion is about restoring these ten loathed and rejected children of God to their lives with others—to being at home once again in their world. Hence he tells them to go to the priests, which they have to do to get the official stamp of 'all clear'—to have their outsider status formally brought to an end. It would be like Jesus telling a vision-impaired person who couldn't get a driver's licence to turn up at the Licensing Centre for an eye-test.

Now, the whole point of this story is that nine of the ten never returned to give thanks. They were content to be back in tune with the system, to have their ordinary lives back. And, God knows, there's a lot of this around. In our Church today we have schools and university colleges that prepare young people for successful and comfortable futures, even to become innovators—though of course innovation within the prescribed boundaries—but only seldom does any product of these Church institutions seem to find their way back

to God, to give thanks to Jesus in his Eucharistic community, and to set out alongside Jesus on the road less travelled.

Only the Samaritan in today's Gospel comes back to praise God and give thanks to Jesus: that is, the one out of ten who, as a Samaritan, remained a social outsider even without the leprosy. In Luke's Gospel Jesus refuses to call fire down on an unwelcoming Samaritan village, and he tells his parable of a good Samaritan. Clearly the Samaritan is a representative figure. He's that bad hombre who President Trump warned about, from South of the border; he's the asylum seeker taking our jobs; he's the climate change activist who should lose his unemployment benefits; or else he's the cranky Sky News evening anchor or the ideologically lacquered Murdoch press columnist—in other words, he's whoever it is you like least of all. Friends, Jesus is making a point here about the Church and who we'll find in it. He's also making a point about the system, about the status quo, and how it'll have to change in order to accommodate God's shocking generosity.

Now, what are we to do with this? As we know, the system remains. Jesus' project is only half realised. So where do we stand, we who gather for the Eucharist, we who—officially at least—have come back to Jesus giving thanks, while so many other beneficiaries of his

grace are failing to do so? Here I'm helped in my reflections by our other two readings this morning.

The prophet Jeremiah gives some memorable advice to God's people in exile, in our first reading. He's telling them not to curse their fate, and he goes on after today's passage to warn against listening to false prophets who promise them that deliverance is just around the corner. That will come in God's good time. Instead, at least for now, God's people are to live at peace in an alien environment where things don't entirely line up as they'd like. We hear that they're to settle down to the commitments of normal life: to marriage, to family, to house-holding, and to being positive about the community they're part of—the fortunes of which are inextricably bound up with their fortunes, at least for the foreseeable future. Here is advice that Anglicans should find familiar and reassuring, given that we've opted for being a Church at peace in the wider society, rather than a sect living at odds with it. We leave that to the Jehovah's Witnesses and other such groups that seek out the margins of society.

Yet Anglicans can get too comfortable with the status quo, and be too at home in the world. Here the warning of an old apostle to a young Church leader in our second reading provides a corrective. And Deacon Kate will surely be taking notice of that reading, as she

looks forward to her priesting in December, eventually to her own parish or to whatever other adventure God has in store.

The message of this reading is that Christ is the radical centre to which we must hold in ministry, even though his cause will always meet opposition, and not least from within the Church itself. What he offers is just too unsettling for too many people. So, in our second reading today, Timothy is told on behalf of all of us in ministry that we can expect to suffer all sorts of things in solidarity with Jesus for the sake of his elect. And if we refuse this challenge we lose both ourselves and a great opportunity. So, Kate, that's the deal. In the words of our Psalm today,

You let our enemies ride over our heads,
we went through fire and water:
but you brought us out into a place of liberty.

So ... I've coined the phrase 'sensible radicalism' as a way of summing up what I'm driving at this morning. Jesus is pleased to restore us to life, and to a place in society, as he did with those lepers. He doesn't serve the system—the very system that mandated their exclusion—but he doesn't want us to join him in overthrowing it either. Rather, we're to live at peace within it as much and as long as we need to, while never entirely settling for things as they are. While Jesus is

non-revolutionary and non-violent, nevertheless he's at work loosening the system and reknitting it in more life-giving patterns. It won't necessarily be easy to be part of this process, especially for those of us in ministry who take Jesus' call seriously, as set out in 2nd Timothy today. But it's the only way for us, as sensible radicals set down here in the midst of life, but who like the Samaritan in our Gospel aren't content just to slip back into the herd.

The Lord be with you ...