

Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

The Reverend Andrew Sempell

Rector of St James

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“Enigma Variations”

Readings: Genesis 22: 1-14; Psalm 13; Romans 6: 12-23; Matthew 10: 40-42.

The post-modern world throws up some challenges for those people with an historical consciousness. History has been held under suspicion by social commentators for half a century now as being the narrative ‘of the victorious’ over that of the downtrodden and powerless.

This sentiment has broken out upon the world stage in the past month following the killing of George Floyd in the United States and the rise of the Black Lives Matter protests. More recently, it has segued into the removal of statues of historical figures who are regarded as having been indifferent to the plight of the poor and dispossessed.

Of course, this is not the first time in western history that iconoclasm has taken hold. It is to be found in our own church history, be it the European Wars of Religion, Oliver Cromwell and the Puritans in Britain, or the boarding up of stained-glass windows here in Sydney Anglican Churches. On all occasions, it arises from a desire to ‘correct’ history and provide a new narrative about what is considered good or approved.

Like the Puritans, the religions of Judaism and Islam have tended to avoid ‘graven images’ or sculptures of living things because they are considered idolatrous and draw people away from God. There is also the problem that many of those who were at one time considered heroes and worthy of public recognition are later discovered to have ‘feet of clay’ and are no better, or possibly worse, than the average Joe. Perhaps it is safer not to have heroes, perhaps it is safer not to have history. It is an enigma.

Many years ago, soon after I came to St James’, I wrote to the then Premier to invite him to an historical celebration here at the church, but there was no answer. After several more emails and phone calls I finally got through to the Chief of Staff who said: “Father, we don’t do history please stop asking!” Well, I had never heard such an argument from an apparatchik before, but it was instructive!

The government ‘didn’t do history’! I suppose this is because it is much safer, it’s the post-modern solution to ambiguity; and, after all, it’s much easier to send the Powerhouse Museum to Parramatta that way. Perhaps the ‘humanities’ might just go away too!

In contrast, it reminded me of when I visited in Russia in 2006 and was intrigued to see so many churches full of young people. I asked our guide what was going on? She replied that they are trying to discover what it is to be ‘Russian’. She went on to explain that in the Soviet Era (which is Russian code for ‘the bad old days’), no history was taught about any time before the Revolution; in fact, history began with the Revolution! This was another convenient way of avoiding things that one did not like or approve.

Nevertheless, avoidance is not that easy because history is our collected memory. It reminds us from whence we came, sets events in a context, and provides us with meaning. As the philosopher, George Santayana, famously wrote: “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it”. This brings us to the patriarch Abraham.

The Enigma of Abraham

What on earth was Abraham doing taking his son up a mountain to kill him? At one level, this seems to be a scandalous story of child-sacrifice to a malevolent god. In what way would Abraham think that this was a god worth worshipping? Later passages in the Hebrew scriptures condemn human sacrifice, but here it is not clear, it is a bit of an enigma. We need to grapple with the context.

The Ammonite god Molech (referred to in latter Biblical passages – Leviticus 18:21 & Jeremiah 32:35) received child sacrifices to ensure good harvests. There is also archaeological evidence of Ammonite temples where human sacrifice took place. Perhaps, in the time of Abraham, the sacrifice of children was a common practice in the Canaanite region? Perhaps Abraham thought this was what God required of him?

The rabbinical reading of the narrative recognises two elements. First is the testing of Abraham’s obedience, or his total submission to God, which he achieves. It is argued that God never had the intention of having the boy sacrificed and instead sought to teach Abraham a lesson. This is the second element, which is the revelation that, unlike the neighbouring Ammonites, God had no interest in human sacrifice, indeed, abhorred it.

In the story of the Binding of Isaac we discover why the Hebrew people did not sacrifice their children as others did, but instead used animals. Moreover, chronologically, this story comes before the giving of the law and the covenant with Moses. Abraham’s covenant involved receiving the land not the law. It is the historical context that helps us to understand the passage in this way, but it is not the only way it is understood.

The Christian faith has discovered new meanings in this passage that are less historical and more theological. There are also two aspects to these views; first of which is the demonstration of Abraham’s faith in trusting God. This is developed in the New Testament book Hebrews, in which the primacy of faith is argued as being a means to salvation.

The second aspect is less Scriptural, less historical, and more ideological. It argues that the sacrifice of Isaac prefigures the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. In the hands of some theologians, however, it goes further such that Jesus becomes the son who was actually sacrificed by his father as a sin offering for the world. This narrative argues that God the Father was the active agent who brought about the death of Jesus. It takes us all the way back to the Ammonites.

This theological position is called the ‘penal substitutionary theory of the atonement’ and is prevalent here in the Anglican Diocese of Sydney. It creates yet another enigma, because it argues that God required appeasement for sin, and it was only his Son Jesus that could be the sufficient sacrifice to satisfy this legal obligation. In other words, God kills his Son to get the world right with himself. Is this a win for the Ammonite god Molech?

Perhaps there is another theological way we can understand this sacrifice. If the agent in the death of Jesus is humanity rather than God, the narrative turns around. Humanity, acting through the scribes, chief priests and Roman authorities are the agents of Jesus death. God does not want the sacrifice of Jesus, but humans do. Through his death, Jesus became the scapegoat that humans hoped would take away their problems and restore the status quo; but death doesn’t bind God and so in response, God restored him to life. The sin of humanity therefore does not bind God, but rather the grace of God binds humanity.

The Enigma of St Paul

St Paul’s writings constantly emphasise the spiritual movement from death to life; arguing that this world is passing away and that the followers of Christ belong to another world ruled by grace rather than law. This grace gives people freedom, but it is a freedom that brings transformation and goodness – it brings life rather than death.

To illustrate this, St Paul uses the metaphor of ‘slave’ – an image that would have been very familiar to his readers, but not popular today. Slaves were common in the ancient world either as spoils of war and conflict, piracy, the result of financial ruin and bankruptcy, the desire for security in work, food, and accommodation, or the many who were born into it. The slaves were the workers upon which the greatness of the Roman Empire was built and comprised around 25% of the population.

The Roman empire considered slavery a necessity for the good of society. Freedom was a privilege for the elite, not a right for all people. As has been the case down through history, even to our own times, slaves have no rights and often no legal status or individuality. They are merely property that can be bought or sold. As history has shown, the consequences of such economic and political arrangements have made some nations wealthy on the one hand but has brought poverty and social dysfunction on the other.

Recent events have highlighted the problem of slavery even to successive generations of free men and women. It has created attitudes of the inferiority of people of differing classes, races and religions that cause them to be treated differently to the majority. It likewise maintains power imbalances, economic disadvantage, and limits access to basic resources of education, health, and housing. It is a reminder of injustice.

Nevertheless, St Paul uses the image of slavery to identify how a person's life is shaped and motivated. We can be slaves to sin and brokenness on the one hand, or slaves to righteousness on the other; with the rewards of life or death following from our decisions. Unlike a Roman slave, he suggests that we are responsible for our decisions and actions. We are therefore slaves to God by choice – another enigma!

The Enigma of following Christ

St Paul encourages his readers to willingly act like slaves to God, which involves obedience and transformation. In fact, it is about changing our attitudes about ourselves and others so that we can be a means for God's grace.

One of my vestry prayers is to ask God to “bless us who serve in the sanctuary, so that through this worship that we offer, others may be blessed and that we may go out to be a blessing to the wider world”. As slaves of God we need to be a blessing to others.

This is the image that Jesus picks up in today's gospel reading. Whoever we welcome, we welcome as if they are Jesus himself; be they slave or free, Christian or Muslim, black or white, male or female, for we are all one in Christ.

History reminds us that, as Christians, we have not always been good at such hospitality. Too often we have been the cause of slavery and abuse, of discrimination and division, and of wilful ignorance and bigotry. History reminds us of both human successes and failures. Most importantly, it reminds us of those who have sought to bring about righteousness, although having feet of clay: Hilda of Whitby, Francis of Assisi, Vincent de Paul, William Wilberforce, Caroline Chisholm, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Mother Theresa, Brother Roger of Taize, and Catherine Hamlyn - to name but a few.

*“...grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console,
to be understood, as to understand,
to be loved, as to love;
for it is in giving that we receive,
and it's in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it's in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.”*