

## **Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney**

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*Rector of St James'*

### **Choral Evensong - Prayer for Refugees**

**29 August 2021**

**Readings:** Song of Songs 4: 7-15; Psalm 15; James 1: 1-13.

***“In Earth, as it is in Heaven”***

#### **The Kingdom of this World**

Chairman Mao Zedong of China wrote in 1938: *“Politics is war without bloodshed, while war is politics with bloodshed”*

As we observe the turmoil occurring in many parts of the world, and especially in Afghanistan at this moment, we are reminded of the constant power struggles between nations, groups of people, and individuals. As we see strong countries project power, create wars, acts of terror, and the resultant refugees that seek safety; we are also reminded that it has been forever thus.

Such behaviour is ugly, yet it also reveals a true aspect of our human nature – it is a sign of sin and self-interest. Indeed, the constant need for police and defence forces is a present reminder of our human brokenness.

Realpolitik (or political realism) is about the exercise of power to protect state interests by threatening one another with military, economic, or political aggression. The concept, developed in nineteenth century Germany, and describes the way by which international relations are exercised by the powerful – sometimes called ‘gun-boat diplomacy’.

It is linked to the competition for control over the world's resources, such as oil and minerals, and is based upon a nation's capacity to inflict harm upon others. To be sure, it sets one nation's self-interest over and against the interests of other nations and even the wider international community.

The techniques employed in power politics comprise the development of military weapons, the use of pre-emptive strikes, political blackmail, the deployment of military units near other nations, the imposition of economic sanctions, intelligence gathering, covert operations, terrorism, and outright warfare.

This aggressive approach to international relations is understood to be a pragmatic response to the political needs of the day and was as much embraced by the two twentieth century political extremes of Marxism and Fascism, as it is today by all sides of the political spectrum; but it is not the way of God.

## **The Kingdom of God**

This morning I preached on the theme of love. Interestingly, we then had readings from the Song of Songs and the Epistle of James as we do this evening. They are different readings but carry a similar theme. The first is about erotic love and the second is about communal love in action, yet through both we can come to understand that God is present to our world and the ordinary things of life, because the nature of God is love.

Jesus preached the Kingdom of God, which is God's rule of love in our hearts. This law of love may be contrasted with the law of power and violence. God's love becomes present in the world through a self-sacrificial concern for the well-being of others. We can therefore recognise the Kingdom of God through acts of justice, mercy, renewal, grace, freedom, and joy. Conversely we can know its absence where there is injustice, arrogance, bullying, and a lack of empathy.

The twentieth century prophet, Lesslie Newbigin, emphasised the importance of **relationships** in the process of spiritual knowing and understanding. He also acknowledged the importance of experience, commitment, and the role of the community in the development of meaning and wisdom. It is not so much 'correct' dogma and praxis that reveals the Kingdom of God, but rather healthy and positive relationships – an important concept that all in the church need to grasp.

**Diversity**, Newbigin argues, is another principle that needs to be integrated into our communal life. A sustainable ecosystem needs to have a high degree of biological diversity to survive, especially in times of change. A monoculture, on the other hand, can only thrive in one set of circumstances and is vulnerable to small changes in the environment.

For a society to thrive it needs to focus on the diversity of pressing concerns surrounding it, such as:

- care for the natural world,
- the importance of relationships and the need for justice and mercy, both within our community and across cultures,
- the seeking of international justice and opportunity (including for refugees),
- identification of what binds us together as human beings, and
- the development of a communal hope and purpose that transcends self-interest, sect, and partisan politics.

By becoming less self-absorbed we can discover the freedom to be the people that God wants us to be, thereby being empowered to go out and engage the world in all its struggles and challenges, doing good, seeking justice, and being the presence of Christ to others.

## **Love Versus Fear**

Popular culture suggests that the opposite of ‘love’ is ‘hate’, but it is not so. Hate is an emotional response of anger or disgust often in response to the failure of love. In this respect it is dependent on the presence of love to operate.

In contrast, the absence of love is ‘fear’. We fear those things that are alien to us, that threaten us, and in which we can see no good – be it people or circumstances. In this way we can create a fear of the ‘other’, of the ‘not us’, of that for which there is no love.

Interestingly, we can also fear things that we desire but that challenge our security, of which ‘freedom’ is an example. In this respect, we like to be free to have control over our lives, but we also prefer not to be held to account for the decisions we have made or to have our motivations examined. We therefore seek to deflect responsibility on to others rather than own it for ourselves.

Back in the 1940’s the psychologist and philosopher Erich Fromm wrote a book entitled *The Fear of Freedom*. In it he proposed that human beings throughout history have yearned after ‘freedom’, but once it has been gained tend to hand it over to another form of enslavement.

Just like eating of the ‘fruit of the knowledge of good and evil’ in the Garden of Eden, the problem that comes with freedom is that it brings responsibility and accountability. In short, human beings end up fearing freedom because of what it requires of us. So, we say one thing but do another, which leads us into hypocrisy and bad faith. I have described it as being like a reverse Beatitudes (better known as the ‘Bad-attitudes’):

- act unjustly and you will come to fear your neighbour,
- take away a person’s security and dignity and they will turn on you, for they have nothing to lose,
- lie, cheat and steal and you will destroy trust and good-will in the community,
- be aggressive and you will receive violence in return, and
- destroy the environment and it will destroy you.

If we are to cultivate goodness in the life of the community and encourage human virtue, then there is a need to develop acceptance and trust between people. Spiritually, that is how we develop our relationship with God, and that very relationship is then reflected in our relationships with each other. However, fear stands against love and prevents growth in goodness.

If we continue to fear other people who are different from us, or if we fear what may happen to us in the street or at home, or if we fear our neighbours, then we will struggle to develop healthy relationships. If we want to be truly 'free' then we need to overcome the effects of fear and learn to love and trust more.

## **Redemption**

The recent descent into violence and chaos in Afghanistan reminds us of how vulnerable the world is to violence and fear. Sadly, it is not an uncommon story down through human history. War, violence, and persecution are part of the human story that reveals our brokenness and sin.

The difference is that this current disaster is on our watch. As participants in the Afghan War over the past twenty years, Australia takes partial responsibility for what has happened and therefore needs to be part of the solution; despite having dragged our feet in response.

To be sure, the reactions of the nations of the world to this crisis will give a telling insight into the hearts of their peoples and leaders. Indeed, the response will take many months, even years, of work before there will be any sense of recovery. In the meantime the refugees and asylum seekers will continue to seek out safety, as they have done from every other crisis in our times.

As those who live in the Kingdom of God, our primary focus should be upon the victims of this tragedy and especially those who fear for their lives, the betrayed, the injured, the homeless, and orphaned. Realpolitik or the Kingdom of God, the choice is ours.

The gospel message is one of hope, even in the face of overwhelming disaster. We are called to reflect and pray for those caught up in this crisis and to think about how we might respond in an act of generosity of spirit in this time of darkness. Failure to do this, would bring the charge of hypocrisy and reflect a 'Bad-attitude' with subsequent consequences.