

Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

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Rector of St James

Pentecost 2

19 June 2022

“Transforming the World One Person at a Time”

Readings: 1 Kings 19:1–4, 8–15; Psalm 42; Galatians 3:23–29; Luke 8:26–39.

A Weed By Any Other Name...

About ten years ago, Rosemary, Kate and I were in the United Kingdom. At one point we took a walk along a section of the Spey River in Scotland. It is a glorious part of the world for many reasons, but we were especially fortunate to be there when the naturally growing raspberries were fruiting. It was easy to walk along and pick the fruit as one went – a simple pleasure that has lodged itself in my memory.

In contrast, I had grown raspberries in our garden in Bathurst. These plants enjoyed the central tableland climate and grew abundantly – too abundantly! They grew thick and fast, had a few tart fruit, and began to take over the area in which they were planted. Far from being a simple pleasure, these plants had become a nuisance, indeed a noxious weed in our garden.

It has been a similar story with blackberries in much of Australia, where they destroy the habitat and create havens for rabbits and foxes. You see, a weed is a plant that is growing in the wrong place and in the wrong way. They are all plants growing in the natural world, yet what may be a joy in one place can become a curse in another when it ceases to grow in balance with the world around it.

Once out of control, weeds can not only destroy the environment for other plants but also destroy the environment for themselves, thereby rendering the ecosystem unfit for the growth of anything.

Now I am not against a plant that may be termed a weed, simply because it does not seem to fit in. I have learnt that good pastures need to have at least fifteen different plant species to be sustainable, which includes some that may be called weeds. It is diversity that is important in this context rather than the domination of one species of plant. A wheat field may look neat and tidy and be productive, but it is highly vulnerable to changes in climate and is prone to cause soil degradation over time.

All Sorts and Conditions...

One of the beautiful prayers from the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, and one sometimes heard at Choral Mattins, goes:

*O God, the Creator and Preserver of all mankind,
we humbly beseech thee for all sorts and conditions of men;
that thou wouldest be pleased to make thy ways known unto them,
thy saving health unto all nations....*

It comes from a time when the church was less an exclusive club for religious people and more a community that recognised all people as belonging to it. The church therefore prayed for the good of all. The phrase ‘*all sorts and conditions of men*’ accepts that, we in the church, are not all the same but rather are a diversity of people that transcends the social boundaries of ‘age, class, race, sexual orientation, and religion’.

It reflects what St Paul wrote to the Galatians:

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. (Galatians 3: 28)

These were extraordinary words in their day when hard boundaries existed between religion, class, and sex. To be sure, they are still challenging in many places during our own times. The apostle warns against relying upon such distinctions, especially when tied up by religious legalism. In God’s world all belong, and the heavenly ecosystem is diverse so that all might thrive. The risk to such diversity is monoculture where either the weeds or the cultivated plants take control to the exclusion of others.

We must therefore be cautious about classing someone as a weed and saying that they do not belong. The challenge for the church, therefore, is to define itself by inclusion rather than exclusion – to be a diverse ecosystem rather than a monoculture.

Because He Too is a Son of Abraham

The Gospel of Luke describes an encounter between Jesus and the tax collector Zacchaeus. The result was that Zacchaeus realised his wrongdoing by stealing from both the government and the people and therefore resolved to give the money back. Jesus’ response was to proclaim, “Today salvation has come to this house because he [Zacchaeus] too is a son of Abraham” (Luke 19: 1-10).

St Paul is also interested in seeing salvation in terms of being ‘Abraham’s offspring’ if one belongs to Christ. In this instance it does not matter if a person is of physical descent from Abraham, as Zacchaeus probably was. Paul argues that any person can become a child of Abraham; but what does this mean?

St Paul drew on the ideas of adoption on the one hand and of covenant between God and Abraham on the other. This included God's promise that Abraham would become the ancestor of a great nation. This concept is extended through the writings of the New Testament to argue that the covenant includes those who are followers of Christ, and who are welcomed into it by adoption as God's children.

There are many covenants described in the Hebrew Scriptures of which the key ones are those with Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David. The Abrahamic Covenant (Genesis 12 & 15) is significant because in it God promises Abraham a land, descendants, and blessings that would extend through him to all people. Being part of the Abrahamic Covenant is to belong to God's people. But what is a covenant?

The Late Lord Jonathan Sacks, a former Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, compared covenants with the idea of contract. He said at the 2008 Lambeth Conference:

What's a contract? A contract is an agreement between two or more individuals, each pursuing their own interest, and they come together to make an exchange for mutual benefit; and so you get a commercial contract that creates the market, and you get the social contract that creates the state.

A covenant is something different. In a covenant, two or more individuals, each respecting the dignity and the integrity of the other, come together in a bond of love and trust, to share their interests, sometimes even to share their lives, by pledging faithfulness to one another, to do together what neither of us can do alone.

... A contract is a transaction, but a covenant is a relationship. Or, to put it slightly differently, a contract is about interests, but a covenant is about identity; and that is why contracts benefit, but covenants transform."

(Sacks J, Address: 'The Relationship between People and God' Lambeth Conference 2008)

The idea of covenant informs us of what we, the church as 'the body of Christ', are meant to be. The church is based upon a set of faithful relationships rather than shared self-interests such as found in an ideology of particular beliefs and practices. Moreover, the church is meant to be a place of transformation of the world rather than one of mutual benefits for those who belong.

For us, a New Covenant was instituted by Jesus using bread and wine at the Last Supper, and it is continued through Baptism and Eucharist in the church today. These signs (or sacraments) are available to all who are part of this new covenant and cannot be refused to those whom we do not like or approve. This covenant is based on loving relationships not on mutual political or social interests. Indeed, it is about change and transformation not about keeping things as they are.

In His Right Mind

It is likely that the Gerasene demoniac was a Gentile and not a Jew. Certainly the Gerasene county was not Jewish territory, to which the presence of the pigs attests. Moreover, the locals were not too keen to have Jesus present and asked him to leave, for they were afraid of him.

The demon possessed man was a complete ‘outsider’ both to his own community as well as the Jewish one. His demon possession, or madness, made him a weed in both the Gerasene and Jewish gardens.

Of course, today we appreciate that the man suffered from a mental illness. Science has helped us to understand that mental illness can cause extreme behaviour – even self-destructive behaviour. Nevertheless, the narrative describes the situation in the context, ideas, and language of the day.

What is important here is the message of healing and transformation. The encounter with Jesus brought about restoration and wholeness to the man’s life. To be sure, he ended up as a disciple ‘sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind’. Moreover, Jesus sent him as an apostle to his own people to proclaim God’s grace.

The brokenness in this man’s mind had taken over and destroyed his life, such that he could no longer be the person he was meant to be. The demoniac’s fate was to live a life of exclusion, however Jesus’ ministry reversed this by bringing him into the centre and recognising that he too is a ‘son of Abraham’. Healing and restoration overcame the barriers that divided him from the community.

These stories and accounts inform us of both who belongs to the church and what the church is meant to do. As God’s people, we are called to exercise a ministry of healing and restoration. But first we need to recognise that we live under a new covenant based on God’s love for all people. It is not obedience to the law that brings salvation but rather God’s grace directed toward us, which we in turn need to bring into the lives of others.

It is therefore not our job to decide who is in and who is out, or to judge who is right and who is wrong – God does that. We are called to be faithful in all our diversity, to wait in the silence for the voice of God, and then proclaim the goodness of the Lord to all people without distinction. It is a challenging responsibility, but nevertheless it is the one to which we are called!