

taking action in advent

a sermon preached on the
second sunday in advent

10 December 2017

at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

by father richard wilson

the lections: Isaiah 40.1-11, Psalm 85, 2 Peter 3.8-15a, Mark 1.1-18

Isaiah commences our readings today with that oh-so-familiar opening to Handel's Messiah – 'Comfort ye, O comfort ye my people, saith your God, speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquities are pardoned' – in the words of the libretto. This is a lament of the Jewish people under punishment, captive to a cruel and oppressive master in Babylon, following the sack and evacuation of Jerusalem in 586 BCE.

It is not until the gracious intervention of Cyrus the Great, ruler of Persia that they are set free, gracious because Cyrus is an instrument of God, the comforter. The story of the conclusion of the Babylonian captivity resonates in Advent because we too wait for the coming of an instrument of God to set us free from our captivity and oppression. But captivity and oppression by whom, and in what way?

Jesus, Shepherd of Israel, is, of course the one for whom we wait, anticipating deliverance. But deliverance from what? In a society where our freedom seems assured, where our standard of living in all respects out-strips most of the rest of the world, it is hard, at first glance, to see what it is that we need to be freed from. We might even be tempted to ask ourselves, as the children of the Enlightenment did – still do – why do we need a Messiah at all?

These past few weeks have been tumultuous for the political history of this country. On one hand, the voice of the people rang out, standing side by side with the minority gay community in calling for the legalisation of same-sex marriage. The legislation has proceeded through parliament with unexpected support, passing in the House of Representatives just a few days ago. It was an example of a people standing up against a minority of politicians who sought to gain a political outcome against popular preference. They were vanquished, as was, I must say, the Archbishop of Sydney who spent \$1million of the church's money on the 'No Campaign'.

At the same time, a deplorable and altogether different political history is playing out on Manus Island and Nauru where an unaccountably and unnecessarily harsh program of detention of asylum seekers and refugees is being carried out, accompanied by protests of Australian and international humanitarian agencies. Not only have asylum seekers and refugees been abandoned in Manus Island. Just this week it was revealed that the Department of Immigration and Border Protection coerces young families to split apart in order to qualify for resettlement. How is this extraordinary, callous behaviour justified by our political leadership? What at first seemed to be an outrage of discrimination has now descended to a humanitarian tragedy.

Like freedom for same-sex marriage, the majority of Australians want the refugees on Manus Island and Nauru resettled in Australia, according to a Roy Morgan Research poll in February this year. The question I have now is: how can it be that with two forms of discrimination, both of which

do not have the support of the Australian people, one can be overturned so easily while the other remains, it seems, intractable?

It seems to me that a succession of governments of different political hues are following a kind of minority populism on refugee policy – one that depends on an argument that refugees will swamp the nation, take our jobs and turn our legal system back to the middle ages in the form of Sharia law. Of course, this is nonsense and most people do not support it. So why does it prevail?

And who is to help? Surely if anyone is able to change government policy it is us, the citizenry, to whom, at least notionally, our elected representatives are responsible. My numerous letters on the state of Manus Island and Nauru over the past weeks to my local member, the Minister for Immigration and Border Protection, and the Prime Minister have gone unanswered in any real sense. Demands for decency fall on deaf ears.

It seems to me that we have not fought hard enough for change, as we did fight for change over same-sex marriage. On refugees, we just don't care enough, even though the human cost of the discrimination is so unimaginably tragic. We have accepted the 'alt right' argument that refugees are less than human, not part of our community.

By not acting, by not fighting hard enough, we are complicit, we are part of the oppression, part of the problem. So I believe the delivery we need, the one we await this Advent season, is from our complicity with political forces in this country whom we have not tried hard enough to call to account.

So, in Advent, it seems to me we need to be freed from ourselves, from our attachment to this comfortable and privileged social space which we occupy. But why would we need to be freed from it? Because it is comfort and security that we enjoy at the expense of others; comfort and complacent acceptance of spurious arguments like those of the alt right who have lead us to disaster.

The old way of doing politics no longer works. Political self-interest has bankrupted democracy and needs a fresh approach to force it to accountability. We have to be less comfortable and less complacent.

But just thinking it or saying it doesn't work. We need to act. The question I pose this Advent, for myself, for you, for the church, is how can I respond to the prospect and Advent of Jesus to act against oppression? How can Jesus turn me around to face another way, from being a complicit oppressor to being an active campaigner for freedom and an active campaigner against discrimination? What does it take to make us respond to the injustice that is before us?

What I look to in Advent is for the Shepherd of Israel to come, to be the author and principle of action on behalf of the discriminated, detained, oppressed in this nation: action from myself, action from this community, and action from the church at large. Mark's Gospel demonstrates in its very concentrated form, that the history of the commencement of Jesus' mission was based in action. In every part of what we read from Mark this morning is an energy in the people to act, to stand up, to lay down what they are doing now and do something different for the sake of a principle. To take a risk, to be careless of personal cost, to oppose the status quo, to oppose authority, to follow him, to be disciples.