

transforming society

a sermon preached on the

third sunday in lent

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at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Isaiah 55:1-9, Psalm 63:1-8, 1 Corinthians 10:1-13, Luke 13:31-35

If we step back a bit from the intense focus of Luke's gospel, and Jesus' curious encounter with some Pharisees, we see Jesus part way through his extraordinary ministry of healing. A ministry which, if you flick through the pages of Luke, can read like a never-ending list of isolated events – a sermon here, a cure there, a meeting with John's disciples, another sermon – the one on the plain, a demon cast out, an exhortation to ministry, a warning about hypocrisy. It seems impossibly busy and perhaps directionless.

But it is far from directionless. We know Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, both in the physical reality of his travel, and in the sense of his mission and life-purpose. Jerusalem is already both a destination on his itinerary and a future point in salvation history.

In what we just heard, Jesus is warned by some Pharisees that Herod is after his blood. Responding to them, Jesus draws a line in the sand both in what he says – calling Herod a fox – and in the distinction he draws between Herod and himself. Jesus gives the Pharisees a precise summary of what he has done, encapsulating his frenetic ministry when he says 'I am casting out demons and performing cures today'.

He then sends the Pharisees away with a question hanging – this is what I have done, what has Herod done – ask that fox from me? Or, for that matter, what have you Pharisees done? As I think I have said before, Jesus knows how to pick a fight!

Today's encounter is with Herod Antipas the Tetrarch of Galilee. The Herod family were Idumean Jews, a family of no particular prominence until Antipas's father, Herod the Great, convinced the Roman Senate he would be a suitable ruler of Judea.

His petition was granted, but of course, this favour came with strings attached and Herod committed himself to dependence on Roman favour. However, it allowed him to set out on a career of large and ambitious projects including the expansion of the Temple, the building of the Masada and of the coastal city of Caesarea Maritima. Were these important civic infrastructure developments, or monuments to Herod's vanity?

Herod cultivated influence with the so-called good and great of Jewish and Roman society, surrounding himself with a court of parvenu aristocrats, all the while enriching himself and his family by being, as one description says, 'a farmer of taxes'. He even had a business arrangement with Cleopatra to monopolise mining at the Dead Sea. How history repeats!

The Herod family had its enemies, of course, but they got rid of them with legalised violence and installed their own people. Herod the Great, you will remember for the Massacre of the Innocents from which the Holy Family had to flee. Herod Antipas, his son and the Herod of today's gospel, was

as much a grand-stander, and lickspittle to the Romans as his father. He was just as murderous too, and presaging the moral emptiness of Pilate, Antipas had John the Baptist killed on his wife's whim.

Both Herods were pretenders to the throne of David, but they never quite achieved the authority and importance they so desperately desired. The distinction between their lives and that of Jesus could not be more clear. While the Herods and their friends filled their bellies and their coffers at the expense of the people, Jesus' life of relative poverty and his ministry of healing confronted the established monarchical and religious authority. The people began to see Jesus as the true heir to the throne of David.

Jesus, after all, had the authentic lineage and therefore the more valid claim on David's throne. He came from Bethlehem and was, through his father, Joseph, born in a family line that could be traced back to David. He was no provincial hick on the make; he was the genuine article.

Not for Jesus was the cultivation of power through social connection and self-promotion, not for Jesus was taxation by standover of a weak peasant class, not for Jesus was the exclusion of those who were inconvenient to his ambition, not for Jesus was the corrupt preference of his family, friends and personal interests. No, Jesus took nothing that was not offered, and in return gave healing, hope and peace.

Jesus embodied the vision of Isaiah – one of life in abundance that demanded nothing but faithfulness promising in return all that could be desired. Jesus rejected the banal attractions of the world in favour of a vision of a divine community that transcends anything this world offers. Jesus needed no power, no court, and no social connection that was not based on love and faithfulness.

And so, Herod killed him.

Where does this leave us two thousand years on? I see a church struggling with how it faces into this millennium. We lament power and wealth we once had, but that time has passed. We dream of influence on public policy we no longer exert in the way we once did. We may still occasionally make contact in the mansions and halls of the city with the establishment, the so-called good and great, but really what do they care about the church? And, isn't it true that the influence we lament the loss of, was, at least in part, one of power and wealth and 'importance', and so, just a little bit, Herodian?

The church does recognise this problem. A report presented by the Structures and Viabilities Taskforce of the General Synod in 2014, demonstrated that the percentage of the Australian population who are Anglicans in 2056 will be about zero. The Taskforce called for revolutionary change. Have you noticed any? Contrarily, what may seem like decline, I believe is opportunity.

As the body of Christ we are called to imitate Jesus' acts of mercy and healing and reject the trappings of wealth and power and influence, to prefer the interests of the other to our own. We are called to be a society in transformation, leading by the example of our own lives.

We are called to defend against pretenders to David's throne both in the wider world and within the church itself. We are called to discern the threats from these modern-day Herods who seek to recruit community to their personal benefit. We are called to have the courage to confront and declaim their self-serving. We are called to persevere, living as community when the Herods try to destroy it or co-opt it for their own purpose. We are called to be a political force in Jesus' model.

I sense a hunger in our community for a selfless leadership of this kind. Not one that hopes for glory or to fill its membership or prop up its declining finances, but one that is an authentic champion of the real needs of the people.

Lent offers a time when we can reflect on how we might take on this challenge. How do we keep alive the challenge figured in Jesus' dismissal of the Pharisees? What is required of us is a transformation to

a society that does not depend on social and political influence or corruption or violence but depends on the exercise of love of the other, setting aside of personal interests, to cast aside the demons, to heal and to transform.

If the church did this, if the church looked outside of its walls and offered the life in abundance that Isaiah points to and Jesus offered, then the revolution will have taken place.