

death or life?

a sermon preached on the
fifth sunday in lent

2 April 2017

at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

by fr richard wilson

the lections: Ezekiel 37:1-14; Ps 130; Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-45.

What did you hear just now, what did you perceive, as we listened to the prophets and the gospel? In these stories of Valley of the Dry Bones and of Lazarus and his sisters at Bethany did you hear stories of death or life? Martha is portrayed at Lazarus' tomb as seeing only death and in a very material way – “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days”. Mary too, up to this point believes Lazarus is dead.

Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury has published a book for Lenten reflection this year, entitled *Dethroning Mammon*. In the first chapter he makes a deceptively simple statement that the Christians should see differently because we have seen Jesus.

So when we hear or see Ezekiel's prophecy in the Valley of the Dry Bones, when we see or hear Jesus drawing Lazarus out of his tomb, we don't see death, we see life instead as did Martha and Mary eventually. Death is turned into life through the breathing of the spirit, in the prophecy of Ezekiel himself, and in Jesus' opening of the tomb. We see life because of our understanding of the Gospel of the Kingdom of everlasting life through Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Our frame of thinking has been changed by our exposure to this Gospel. When I first had the opportunity to talk about these stories, one Lent 5 some years ago, I was taken aside afterwards and firmly instructed that whatever happened to Lazarus and in the Valley of the Dry Bones, had to be understood in terms of how human biology works, in its dependence on physical and chemical laws, as we understand them in our human rationality.

My instructor had a career in medicine. He could not accept that Lazarus was, as I must have contended, resurrected, instead he could only have been resuscitated and that Lazarus was subject to these scientific rules of physics, chemistry and biology. So Lazarus could not have been dead, despite the very rational evidence of the smell of his rotting flesh. The whole story needed to be, for this person, interpreted entirely within his framework of understanding forged in his career in medicine with its dependence and indeed glorification of human knowledge and skill. Unfortunately, such a way of seeing limits God's freedom to what can be understood by human knowledge and admits no miracle.

However, from Welby's deceptively simple observation we have a rationale for reading scripture in different contexts and opens couple of interesting opportunities.

Paradoxically, coming from an evangelical, as Welby is, it frees us from the hegemony of biblical literalism and gives us more confidence to argue beyond proof text, beyond simplistic and unsophisticated propositions from the literal.

Such reading allows us to see the parable lifted out of its culture and context, so we can find meaning and insight that can be more easily applied to different contexts. This is a gift for public theology because it enables us to say something distinctive and theological

about what matters to us today, in a way that human rationality cannot. So we can contribute to public debate in a distinctive and constructive way.

If you find this logical, how does it help us today, in Lent with two weeks to go until Easter?

Bishop Huggins is a well known provocateur of the AFL, indefatigably in letter, voice and action appealing for the AFL not to hold footy matches on Good Friday. I am interested in whether this idea is good public theology as it plays out in the public square, as something that might actually be done in the community.

Bishop Philip's argument, drawn from a well of great faithfulness, is that Good Friday represents the day on which, for Christians, the world changed forever and that, given its world-changing significance, to import into it a game of football is a disrespect, we might say a gross disrespect, not least because it also includes, nowadays, the profanity of gambling.

What Bishop Philip is asking resonates with the habits and the tradition of the Church in all the world where we Christians are used to a day of solemn liturgy and for many of us, prayer and quiet reflection. For us it is embedded in the drama of Ash Wednesday, Lent and Passiontide and its culmination in the Resurrection. It forms such a central place in our faith and in the liturgical cycle that to profane it is, properly, anathema for us.

This argument comes from a society that is predominantly Christian. This view, our view, is conditioned by our history in the church and in a segment of Australian culture that honours the Easter events in this particular way. It is the how we see the Easter mystery, from our seeing of Jesus.

Such seeing relies on some assumptions: recognition of the significance of Good Friday and the manner in which this significance should be responded to; it assumes that this significance is more or less equally understood by the entire community (more or less, because I expect Christians may even disagree on its significance); therefore it assumes the community is attuned to the cycle of the life of the church as we are; it assumes the community is either all Christian or that we live in the culture dominated by Christianity and all it brings with it.

These assumptions paint a picture of how Australia once was, but in multicultural Australia in 2017, are we all Christian, are we are all participants in the same culture? Hasn't there been, since at least colonial settlement, if not before, a variety of cultures in this land? Isn't this cultural diversity expanding?

Potentially, to impose a ban on any community practice on a Christian holiday is to expect to make that imposition on a population that is demonstrably not Christian. If you think Australia is still a Christian culture, take a look at the most recent Census and NCLS.

Paradoxically the only other culture that is likely to support no footy on Good Friday, is Islam.

So, when we take this public theological argument out of the confines of our own context, it becomes less clear. Our seeing of other cultures, our appreciation of the needs and preferences of other people potentially leads us to think in a different way about Good Friday and about how we relate in a diverse community. You may think this is to stop seeing Jesus but I would argue that to put another person's interests ahead of our own, to empty ourselves for the sake of another person or community is a very Christ-like thing to do.

Moreover, it does not mean that we stop observing Good Friday, it does not mean that we Christians stop being still for that day, that we stop praying. Not at all. Instead, I believe, it opens our eyes to a much more important issue of public theology that our own preferences and reveals something the whole community needs. Our concern over our desire for stillness, reflection and prayer on this important day for us, signals that that all of society needs the capacity, sometimes, to just stop working and to be still, to have a Sabbath.

Seeing Good Friday through a theology of the Sabbath might be used instead for a broader critique of the commercialisation of rest and recreation, the expectation of commercial services, like supermarkets or cafes or hardware shops to be always available. It may even provide a theology through which to view penalty rates for low paid workers. By seeing this way a claim for public policy that comes out of our theology, from Deuteronomy Chs 5 & 15 and from the many practical examples of Jesus makes the church actually look relevant, maybe even modern.

So, what should we do next? Don't go to the footy on Good Friday. Instead think about what the death of Jesus means to the life of our whole community.