

faith in the city
a sermon preached on the
twenty-first sunday after pentecost
29 October 2017
at
st john's
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
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the lections: Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18; Psalm 90; 1 Thessalonians 2:1-13; Matthew 22: 34-46

Some of us possibly have in our church memory a nostalgic/rosy picture of church life in rural Australia. This memory was fed through the stories of Bush ministry and church life from either from both the work of the Bush Brotherhoods or from Bush Church Aid. But most of us have never lived in the bush and when we look closely at the scriptures we quickly see that to a great extent the Bible is an urban book. Today's readings from the letter to the Thessalonians and from Matthew bear this out. The letter from Paul is addressed to Christians in one Greek city Thessalonica –and it talks about events in another-Philippi. Indeed, the Acts of the Apostles demonstrates that Paul's missionary strategy, both in Asia and in Europe, was to evangelise and to establish churches in towns and cities rather than in villages or in the countryside. As a result, Paul's letters to churches are all addressed to urban congregations.

And today's gospel reading is set in Jerusalem, the political, social economic, military and religious capital of Judea. Indeed, in all four Gospels, Jerusalem, the city looms large. The events of Holy week, the last week of Jesus' life on earth, all take place in or just outside of Jerusalem, and occupy a huge percentage of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John's narratives. In addition John also has Jesus visit the capital on at least four other occasions before Palm Sunday, and Matthew, Mark and particularly Luke make much of Jerusalem as Jesus' destination prior to the Triumphal Entry.

The 'Urban' does not just dominate the Bible. It dominates the contemporary world as well. It now seems to be the case that over half of the world's population live in urban areas, and the figure is rapidly increasing all the time. In our own country most Australians live in the cities around the coastal fringe—a very small population lives in rural Australia.

So, the fact that most people in this country live in urban areas, the fact that so much of the Bible comes from an urban culture, the fact that the most significant week of Jesus' life for the evangelists occurred in an urban context can all lead us to conclude that the urban needs to be the prime focus of the church's ministry, mission, concern and prayer today.

That is easy to say. But it is not at all an easy task. For contemporary cities are complex, contested, conflictual, competitive, cosmopolitan places that can be scary to live in, difficult to understand and depressing to minister in.

But, actually, that's how it has always been. Come back to the readings for today. Paul's evangelistic ministry in the cities of the Roman Empire was no bed of roses. In the reading from 1 Thessalonians passage for today he speaks of 'having suffered and been shamefully mistreated in Philippi [2.2], and of declaring to the Thessalonians 'the gospel of God in spite of great opposition'. Urban life and faith for Paul was not easy.

Neither were they for Jesus in Jerusalem, in Holy week. Almost the whole of the narrative of Holy Week is taken up with conflict, contest and competition between Jesus and various parties and factions within Jerusalem, such as the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the teachers of the Law, Herod and his followers, the Romans under Pontius Pilate. The ongoing conflict, contest and competition between those various parties and factions was not of very much interest to the gospel writers, but they hint at it nevertheless, for instance in the note in Luke 23.12 that Herod and Pilate became friends after Jesus' trial, after a long standing feud between them, or in the opening of today's gospel reading from Matthew that declares that

the Pharisees took their turn against Jesus in order to succeed where their rivals the Sadducees had failed.

And in facing the very real challenges of being called to be Church ‘in the city’ today, of being present in the city, of praying for the city, in facing those challenges we can be encouraged and strengthened by both the example and the teaching of both Paul and Jesus.

Both Paul and Jesus had great courage, consistency and constancy. Both were absolutely faithful to God, had absolute trust in God and sought ‘not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts’. 1 Th. 2:4 Both were quite clear about their message and proclaimed it loudly and clearly, yet also with gentleness, courtesy and respect. In short they modelled the love of God for neighbour that was clearly the cornerstone of the teaching of Jesus in the city [Matthew 22: 37-40], derived so very evidently from the Torah.

And in a similar way we are called to be courageous, to be consistent, to be constant, to be faithful to God, to have absolute trust in God, to seek to please God and not those around us, to be quite clear about our Gospel, to proclaim it loudly and clearly, yet to have also gentleness, courtesy and respect for those around us ‘in the city’. In short we are called to love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and mind and to love our neighbours as ourselves ‘in the city’ today—where our neighbours will most likely be very different from us, probably far more different from us than the Samaritan was from the Jew—in Luke’s gospel account the summary of the law is followed by a parable about Samaritans and Jews. Luke 10. 25-38

That is an extremely tall order! But we cannot and must not shirk it. We must be ‘in the city’. And we do have resources to help us in that task, not only the example and teaching of Jesus and Paul, but also the Holy Spirit, Christ’s own presence with us and within us to guide us and sustain us, and the promise of Christ that, if we are faithful—and being faithful is far more important than being ‘successful’—he will be faithful to us, and will ensure that we do not lose our ultimate reward in the heavenly city, the new Jerusalem.