

good or evil?

a sermon preached on the

fourth sunday after pentecost

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at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Jeremiah 28:5-9; Ps 89; Romans 6:12-23; Matthew 10:40-42

The story read from Jeremiah is set in the time of the Babylonian exile. The privileged wealthy of Jerusalem had been forced to vacate to Babylon while the poor remained in Jerusalem to tend the farmland surrounding the city. Jeremiah you may recall remained with them. The desolation of Jerusalem was a blow to the Israelites of proportions we can hardly imagine. Not only was the favoured nation abandoned by God and put under a harsh foreign regime, the City itself, that shining symbol of God's goodness and Israel's superiority, was sacked and the precious temple treasures, including the vessels, were stolen.

Jeremiah's depiction of these events evokes a dualism between good and evil – Jerusalem over against Babylon – a dualism that has become a part of Jewish identity to this day and is infused into Christian symbolism and theology – Augustine's Cities, Luther's Kingdoms. It is also associated with our ideas of the apocalyptic.

We usually associate apocalypse with a combination of the idea of a dystopic and disastrous change, which comes from literature and film, or the sense of a revelation from the Greek meaning of the word. Both the disaster, the loss of the familiar, and what is newly revealed, are part of a process of change.

During this week just passed, Trinity College Theological School ran an intensive course on the book of Daniel, which is one of the key texts of Jewish apocalyptic thought. A friend of mine doing the course remarked to me that even the Beatitudes of Matthew can be read as apocalyptic because they set up a radical future 'good' society as an alternative to the present day 'evil'. I hadn't thought of Matthew as apocalyptic literature until then, so I looked at today's reading in a different way.

I think, without stretching literary credibility too far, we can see that, in a very subtle way, Matthew in today's Gospel does envisage a contrasting vision of society. If you welcome a prophet you will receive a prophet's reward, if you welcome a righteous person, you will receive a righteous person's reward, and if you share a cup of water even with the most vulnerable of people you will receive a disciple's reward. If you do a good thing you will be appropriately rewarded, if not ... Although not the most radical of Jesus' visions of community life, this is clearly a call to hospitality, and even a critique of individualism. But how is it apocalyptic?

Rowan Williams, past Archbishop of Canterbury, in his book 'Faith in the Public Square,' presents a sustained argument for change in our community's approach to the way in which we treat other people, in the way in which we form plural community, that is community made up of people from a variety of backgrounds – ethnic, cultural, religious, language and a range of other preferences. At the heart of his argument, Williams calls us to recognise in every aspect of our common life together, that each person is a human being who is made in the image of God.

In particular, Williams laments the instrumentalisation of people by public policy and corporate action based on neo-liberal economics and the processes of globalisation. He wants to put the person back into a depersonalised world. The apocalyptic dualism of Williams' thought is between a community of hospitality and welcome and a community that allows inequality, a community that allows one part of society to flourish at the expense of another.

So, Williams calls for a radical shift in the way public policy is made, commencing with a renewal of our vision of plural secular community, so that democratic decision-making ceases to be based entirely on the majority voice – or the apparent majority voice of those who shout loudest – and instead becomes a thoughtful and respectful consideration of the needs of the entire community. This would be a substantial shift in political life in this country – it would be an apocalyptic change, and a change to a society that is fundamentally different to what we have now.

Achieving it requires prophetic imagination like that called for by Walter Brueggemann, which I have written about in CONTACT. A change that reimagines what this nation needs in order to look less like Babylon and more like Jerusalem. And that imagination needs to come from us. Of course the issue, as always in the church, is can or will we change? This question comes into sharp focus in the light of this week's release of census results on religious affiliation. The decline in affiliation to the church is relentless and if we don't change, within a generation this church will cease to be.

Brueggemann and Williams both put their fingers on what kind of change is required and for which the church must work – one that refuses to be satisfied with a society that is allowed be moulded by minority political factions and unelected lobbyists for vested interests while a passive majority ignores what happens around it. The apocalyptic alternative we need is one of love, justice and compassion, figured also in the radically open hospitality that Jesus practiced in his lifetime, and gave to us in the Gospel, change that places the human person back into the centre of not only public policy-making but also in business planning, to make them both accountable to the community for the way in which they seek to shape public community life to their private interests.

The good news is that where the church does this, it flourishes. The form it takes may not be what we are expecting or hoping for, it probably will not be a return to some imagined past glory, and it may not be parish as we presently know it. Clearly though, it must be more socially active, in the ways Williams suggests, engaging with the secular community at large, and imagining a society where the human is central. It may look more like the aid and welfare agencies, like Anglican Overseas Aid whom we heard from last week, like the Brotherhood of St Laurence, or Anglicare or Benetas. Socially engaged, society building, active, not passive, and with dirt under its fingernails.

If we cannot support this alternative to which the Gospel calls us and, if we cannot proclaim and work for the alternative of the apocalyptic Kingdom of God, then we will lose our church.