

Sermon - 4th Mark of Mission: addressing injustice

Based on Matthew 27.11-26, and Acts 5.17-42 (from the NRSV)

Today's protests

- In recent times there have been demonstrations in different parts of the world, protesting various forms of injustice.
- Some of the protests have been about injustices in their own countries, while others have been in other countries, but in solidarity.
- The injustices have been concerned with racial or sexual discrimination, or with political oppression, or with economic consequences of COVID-19 policy decisions, or with environmental consequences from a lack of good stewardship of our planet.
- Wherever economic and political power becomes entrenched with an attitude of ownership, rather than distributed with an attitude of custodianship, then injustices are bound to occur.
- This is part of the fallen human condition.
- But it is not part of God's kingdom.
- Indeed, the Scriptures are full of accounts of God inspiring people to name and address injustices, in the written, spoken and even sung word, and through action.

The Song of Mary

- The well-known Song of Mary - or Magnificat - is a powerful song of praise, acknowledging how God's kingdom is made manifest by the upending of the status quo, whereby the wealth of the comfortably provided for is shared with the needy, and where political power is taken from those who try to keep it for themselves and given to the unheard and voiceless.
- Our opening hymn might have sounded like a modern protest song, but it is a contemporary version of Mary's Song:

*Join the song of praise and protest, all the nations of the earth:
God, who loves the poor and humble, sings of dignity and worth.
Those the world has long rejected take at last their rightful place,
sharing in the song of Mary, filled with unexpected grace!*

*Join the song of praise and protest as the voiceless find a voice,
as the pow'rless rise triumphant and the broken hearts rejoice.
Now the God of all creation rights the long-accepted wrongs;
let the voices of the nations swell the liberation song.*

by Michael Forster (b.1946) - Anglican Hymns Old & New (Kevin Mayhew Ltd, 2008)

Jesus' teaching

- And Jesus teaches us the importance of actively addressing the injustices that we encounter.
- In his teachings, such as the Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus explicitly says:
'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5.9-10)
- And when he reached out directly to individuals, he would inevitably reach out to those who were suffering from one kind of social injustice or another - to those who had no social standing, or who were ignored, maligned, or excluded - and he would restore their worth, their dignity, and their ability to resume their rightful place in society.
- In doing so, he welcomed them into the kingdom of God.
- And Jesus calls on us to do likewise, to follow his example, and practise his way of welcoming such people into God's kingdom.

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Study #2: the 4th Mark of Mission

- This speaks directly into the theme for this week, which is the second study of the Bible study booklet we are working through as a church community: Where do we go from here?
- Over the last two weeks we worked through the first study, which addressed the first mark of mission.
- This week we are attending to the second study, which jumps forwards to address the fourth mark of mission, which is
to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation.
- In the light of this, it is tempting to look at some of the different kinds of protests that are going on, and for me to weigh in on some of them.
- I consider it appropriate for me, in the context of my prophetic ministry as a priest, to speak the word of God - as I prayerfully and carefully discern it to be - into protests like these.
- Indeed, I think it important as a Christian community that we don't shrink from the challenges that such protests present to our consciences, and that we engage with the subject of such protests, discerning how God might be speaking *to us*, and how God might possibly speak *through us*.

Two protests in Scripture

- However, today I am deliberately shifting our attention away from the various protests that are happening in our world, and inviting us to reflect, for now, on some other protests that are described in the Scripture passages selected for today's service.
- The first is the protest Jesus makes under arrest, when he faces the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate.
- The second is the protest the apostles make under arrest, when they face the council and elders of Israel.
- The two stories make for interesting parallels.
- In the first, Jesus is silent and makes no answer.
- In the second, the apostles speak out.
- In both cases, the chief priests and elders want to kill - respectively - Jesus and his apostles.
- In the first story, Pilate's wife tries to persuade Pilate to release Jesus, but fails.
- In the second, the Pharisee Gamaliel tries to persuade the council to release the apostles, and succeeds.
- In both cases, Jesus and his apostles - respectively - are flogged.
- In the first story, we recall Jesus crying out on the cross: *'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'*
- In the second story, we read that an angel of the Lord released the apostles from prison.
- In the first story, the council are remembered as saying: *'His blood be on us and on our children!'*
- In the second story, the same council accuse the apostles: *'you are determined to bring this man's blood on us.'*
- In both cases, Jesus and his apostles were being obedient to the will of God as they discerned it to be.
- Both Jesus and his apostles have been acknowledged to have been filled and empowered and encouraged by God's Spirit.
- And all spent considerable time in prayer with God, discerning in each situation, what was the Godly response - what was the most loving, most light-bearing, most life-nurturing response.
- Not for themselves, but for others.

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- Because they were each, respectively, prepared to suffer humiliation, and loss of face, and physical abuse, and torture, and persecution - not for their own benefit, but so that *others* could benefit from the blessing of God that they were each facilitating, and channeling.
- Because they were each - Jesus and his apostles - convinced that it was worth it, that this was the sacrificial love they were called to enact.
- And we, today, acknowledge that they got it right.
- We acknowledge Jesus seated in glory on the throne in heaven, and we revere and honour those first apostles - that motley bunch of Galileans that Jesus called to learn from him - who ticked off the authorities as they started to enact the kingdom of God that Jesus' mother Mary had sung about - that we have sung about.

The *satyagraha* of Jesus

- One of the issues that you might have with the first story today - the Gospel passage of Jesus facing down Pontius Pilate - was that he didn't seem to actually do anything.
- He didn't seem to be actively protesting at all.
- However, there are two important points to make here.
- Firstly, don't forget that by that time Jesus had previously been actively protesting.
- Remember how he overturned the money-changers' tables in the temple, and upset the stalls with the pigeons and other animals being sold for sacrificing?
- Remember how he kept getting up the authorities' noses with his subversive teaching in the temple?
- Remember how he led a political march into the city of Jerusalem, riding a donkey in a parody of the conquering hero claiming what was rightfully his?
- Jesus had already done his attention-getting stirring-up of people who were discontented with their local government who were looking only after their own interests, and not the interests of the people.
- Secondly, bear in mind that there is more than one way to protest.
- Refusing to participate in the system - refusing to acknowledge the system - refusing to engage with the system - is another way to protest.
- Mahatma Ghandi cottoned on to this, and his *satyagraha* form of protest - peaceful non-co-operation - became a significantly effective aspect of protest by the Indian peoples seeking independence from the British colonialists.
- In his peaceful non-co-operation with Pilate, Jesus showed up the way the Jewish authorities had been co-operating, to their own benefit, with the Roman Empire.
- No wonder they couldn't get rid of him fast enough.
- But obviously quite ineffectively, when we read what Peter and the other apostles then preached about, in the same temple, and to the same leadership council.
- So much for 'getting rid' of Jesus.

'When engaged in civil disobedience'

- The final point I want to make is a quote from a national Anglican Church of Australia document, titled Faithfulness in Service: A national code for personal behaviour and the practice of pastoral ministry by clergy and church workers.
- It covers a range of matters concerning appropriate behaviour, not only by clergy, but by anyone who has any role in an Anglican Church - from church wardens to parishioners rostered to arrange flowers.
- Let me quote section 6.23 for you:
'When engaged in civil disobedience, do not act violently or intentionally provoke violence.'
- There is a key word here.

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- It does not state 'If you engage in civil disobedience ...' but 'When you engage in civil disobedience ...'
- It's a pedantic point, but it certainly creates the expectation that there will be occasions when civil disobedience - just like the civil disobedience of the apostles - will be appropriate behaviour for Anglicans.
- Just like there were many Christians in Apartheid South Africa who took civil disobedience to heart - often at great personal cost.
- So when you think about protests such as Black Lives Matter, or Me Too against the sexual abuse of women, or trying to end discrimination against LGBTQI+ people, or against the offshore detention of asylum seekers, or protesting government inaction in addressing climate change, or the political oppression of people in Hong Kong, or any other protests -
- when you feel called to reflect on and engage with such protests - either because you want to take up that cause, or because you would rather maintain the status quo - remember that Jesus and the first apostles did not shy away from participating in protest, in one form or another -
- but also that they were focused on the bigger picture - on the kingdom of God.
- They discerned the Spirit's guidance on what was the loving, the light-bearing, the life-enabling response - and then acted on that, even at personal cost.
- Because *this* is what sacrificial love is.
- And *this* is part of the mission of the Church, in enacting the kingdom of God.