

Lent 5 Sermon
March 20/21 2021 **Anglican Parish of Gisborne**
Rev'd Debra Saffrey-Collins

Readings: Jeremiah 31:31-34
 Ps 119: 9-16
 Hebrews5:5-14
 John12: 20-33

Reference: Pew sheet reflection for noting:

“In our Old Testament reading today, Jeremiah is prophesying to the Jews in Babylon. He interprets the unfaithfulness for which the exile was a punishment as a breach of the old covenant made at the exodus. The prophet looks forward to a new covenant which Yahweh will make with his people. This time God will write his law, no longer on tablets of stone, in the hearts of his people. All of them will then “know” him – i.e. live in obedience to his law.

The old covenant shifts from hand to hand to the new covenant of heart to heart. All that power, love, and life flows from God’s heart to our hearts. To know God is to receive God’s heart and to give God yours. That’s the word of hope and consolation. The prophet who spent his life praying and pleading with the community gets to deliver the good news. There’s no need to mourn; it’s time to hope. The circumstances of their deliverance maintain a secondary position behind their relationship to the Deliverer. Through the grace of God, the people will experience a change of heart—a hopeful heart, a clean heart, a renewed heart. We are the inheritors of that grace. adapted from Reginald H. Fuller and Cheryl Lindsay

Various articles on the internet about the role and place of Greek Tragedy”.

Sermon for Lent 5b

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier Amen.

I have had two surprising conversations this week about John’s gospel - well actually a few if we include our lenten study but these two I want to focus on.

The first was in a room of very experienced, very well trained clergy (I was very much the observer), and we just happened to be discussing the readings for today.

One said “honestly - who knows what John was on about.” So often hard to understand. Seems a constant riddle to me.” I must admit It was refreshing to hear such honesty from one who everyone expects ‘ is supposed to know , ‘

And Another joined in and said well When I was a curate I was given this handy tip and it's really helped me -

I was encouraged to see John's gospel as being like a Greek tragedy. And if you think of it like that there is an answer to much of what we might think is a mystery around John - because we start to see the drama unfolding and the story being told, like an enormous and intricate play.

So I went looking to discover more ... In Greek tragedy, There are always some hecklers and sceptics - in John we can see this role is played by those who question Jesus all the time, the teachers of the law who look to set him up, to prove himself as the son of God, who always have a question with a twist, and those of course who will seek to have him killed.

There are those who support the Underdog ... usually they're the chorus in a Greek tragedy The **chorus** in Classical **Greek drama** was a group of actors who described and commented upon the main action of a play with song, dance, and recitation and mostly it's the disciples we find in that role but also those whom Jesus heals, those whom he meets and teaches to those who offer hospitality and care for him, his mother at the wedding in Cana whom allows Jesus to say ' my time has not yet come', those who are the witnesses to the unfolding drama.

Then there is the hero -

(in ancient Greek theatre) a tragedy was a play in which the protagonist, usually a person of importance and outstanding personal qualities, falls to disaster through the combination of a personal failing and circumstances with which he or she cannot deal or do a thing about. throughout the play this character has many soliloquies and even conversations with themselves, or an invisible being, or in the Greek tradition the gods, (and often Greek tragedy had a very religious focus on the actions of humans and their gods), or simply addressing the audience with the sequence of events to be played out. I think you can see We would cast Jesus in that role recognising that it is the circumstances that particularly control what happens next in an earthly sense

And then there is the narrator who fills in the missing parts or provides the links. The important part for those watching. For us that is John providing the narrative..

Hold that thought.

The other conversation about John's gospel was at our weekly service at the Brotherhood's aged care residential unit. We were looking at another chapter of John's gospel where it's possible to think that we don't know all the story of Jesusor even know fully about Jesus himself..... he's human but then he's fully divine but that's been hidden from uswe're really not sure yet who he is that comes as a surprise doesn't it?

In our discussion One of our residents noted 'well John always wants us to know there is more to know about Jesus, not just that he is the son of god that's pretty amazing but really important for everyone and for us to know that he is.. and that God decided to send his son amongst us - so John is not just someone who wants us to know about god but to also know how much god loves us and it's our job to share that with others. It's our job to show people Jesus and see how much we are loved and wanted as God's children.

As I was thinking about the subject of our Lenten study this week and these two events, it was good to acknowledge that Sometimes we don't have the story right or the knowledge and that's quite ok and what else is ok is that it is others that lead us to understand, or give us the glimpse that puts us on the path to understanding. But we also have a responsibility to make sure others know this story and see for themselves. It's the message of 'sir we want to see Jesus'

In each of the readings set for today we are pushed by the writer to understand that there are greater things yet - things that we haven't thought of, or don't know about, or can't know about in our experience but will come to know as time passes. We also are confronted yet again by the extraordinary love of God for the world and for every part of that world including us.

As it is so eloquently written in the summary In the pew sheet today as we move from the hope of the Old Testament to the new, God creates a new covenant with us, 'not on tablets of stone but in our hearts'. And as the 'word made flesh,' Jesus in John - that new covenant - "is the one who reveals to us what God is like - loving, self giving, life giving" (Dorothy Lee Pollard p8 the years of john).

So back in our Greek tragedy. John - (and it's not actually clear who John is) - writing around 90 to 110 AD although there is enough information to suggest it might have been started around 70AD, Has a very good knowledge of Jewish customs and practices and through the context of the verses in his gospel, sets us up to understand that he is writing for a mixed Jewish/Gentile or Jewish context outside Palestine.

Interestingly, There is currently much debate about the communities of John that has picked up since the turn of this century in comparison to the work of the 20th century, as to the nature of what used to be called the Johannine communities and there is considerable debate over the social, religious and historical context of the gospel. But none the less there is enough implied information in the gospel and other sources, to know that this community stands alone beyond the normal Jewish communities. They have moved out and John works with this community To tell the story, and to focus on what the god of love has in Store through this covenant.. . His son Jesus.

So First of all, on our stage - we do have Greeks, they come because 'they want to see Jesus,'

This is really significant Because it is at this point the gospel, shifts gear as Jesus will now turn his head toward Jerusalem this is the sign Jesus has been waiting for, because it acknowledges that outside of the Jewish community, and beyond its relatively small walls of community, there are those who have received the message that the messiah is amongst us on earth. Right here right now. But even before we get to the passion narrative, John provides us with a dramatic interpretation of the death and resurrection.

In chapter 11 Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead, the Sanhedrin realise he needs to die because they are concerned of the threat to country and state, as they meet together they say to each other " if we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation." And caiphas the high priest says - you know nothing at all, you do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed. And we are told that at this point he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation.

The Greeks are coming to the great festival of the Passover - they are not alone, learned and interested in what is going on around them they come because they have heard and want to see this man Jesus they find disciple Philip from Galilee, who tells Andrew who incidentally is to become the first missionary, and together they tell Jesus that these

Greeks want to see Jesus. And then, notice what happens next. Back on our Greek tragedy stage Jesus says ‘ the hour has come for the son of man to be glorified. I tell you unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies it remains just a single grain, but if it dies it bears much fruit. Jesus tells those listening what is to happen to him then and there. And he does so knowing that he binds us altogether and through the resurrection he will bring all people together... the time is now come.

And then John gives us this most beautiful human moment where Jesus himself knows he must die and says - we can imagine it as being almost to himself, with us watching and observing ... or to us listening in as the audience on the great stage of human life and drama ...

“now my soul is troubled, and what should I say ... Father save me from this hour? No, it is for this reason I have come to this hour.”

The New Testament reading from Hebrews today tells us Jesus offered up prayers and supplications and tears (tea years) to the one who was able to save him from death and he was heard because of his reverent submission... Jesus as human as the rest of us, quite aware of what is to come and why, still cries out to his God, must it be so? And god responds to any who hear this is my son who is glorified...

At this very moment we with Jesus, wrapped up in this spectacle being played out before us, turn our hearts and our minds and our faces with him now towards the events that will unfold in Jerusalem. It of course has to be that the humanness of Jesus will still continue to hope that his death won't come about, but in essence Jesus tells us he knows his fate and he knows that it must be so in obedience to the God of love . The tragedy is complete.

But ‘ we want to see Jesus’ , around the world that little phrase can be found in pulpits particularly to remind those who preach of the great significance of showing their congregations Jesus the son of god. That through their words and the teaching and their actions, those who listen will meet the risen Christ.

But it's just as an important message for us to - when we leave here today how will we help others to see Jesus. All around us are people who want to see Jesus. “ Do they see him in us? Do they see the Servant-Lord who washed the feet of his friends? Do they see the prophet who cleansed the Temple? Do they see the healer who made the blind to see? If we are to let people see Jesus in us, then we must go ourselves and sit at his feet, let

him heal us, feed upon his body broken for us, and above all stand at the cross and wonder as the Word that spoke out of the void lapses into silence and death.”

Last week we spoke about what it meant to us to know that god so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son. This week Jesus himself I believe, makes it very clear. And that's our story to tell isn't it ? When someone asks us can you show me Jesus I want to meet him ... or when someone looks to us as a community and wonders where Jesus is - what will be the answer ? How will we relate the stories of Jesus to those who want to meet us, how will we teach others , how will we take the tragedy of the cross to help others see that this is a sign of hope and of gods great love for each and everyone. ?

Let me go back to our introduction to the readings in the pew sheet today ...

All that power, love, and life flows from God's heart to our hearts.

To know God is to receive God's heart and to give God yours.

That's the word of hope and consolation.

There's no need to mourn; it's time to hope.

Through the grace of God, the people will experience a change of heart—a hopeful heart, a clean heart, a renewed heart. We are the inheritors of that grace.

Next week we begin the great journey into Jerusalem. We will start with the palms and the passion story of Jesus, we will enter into the great days of holy week and culminate in the death of resurrection. Perhaps what travels with us is to consider that request of the Greeks to see Jesus how will we commit to do that in our lives for those whom we meet? To experience a hopeful heart, a changed heart and a grace beyond knowing.

The Lord be with you

Debra Saffrey-Collins 20/21 March 2021