

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
EPIPHANY 5
SUNDAY 9 FEBRUARY 2014,
Rev. Anneke Oppewal
Psalm 27, 1 Corinthians 2

“Cruciform living”

When I chose the image to go with the sermon on the powerpoint this morning, I wasn't quite sure how it connected to the passage I was preaching on, except that somewhere, deep inside, it felt like it was, or my gut instinct told me it was.

With Paul speaking about the wisdom of God being deeper and more important than rational or worldly wisdom alone, I decided to go with it, and even more, to take the picture and that gut feeling as a starting point for the sermon.

The picture is of Hassan, the guide who took us on a tour around the main sights of central Mumbai. We had arrived the day before, and were spotted by Hassan's "boss" when we were making our way to the gateway to India, the "Circular Quay" of Mumbai, which is one of the main tourist attractions close to our hotel. We had the intention of getting on a boat from there to see some of the ancient temple ruins of Elephanta, an island off the coast of Mumbai. As we later discovered, we'd walked straight into a tourist trap, where people like Hassan's boss spot people with little or no experience of Mumbai (like us), and try to sell them tours before anybody else can get to them. We fairly soon cottoned on to the fact that this guy was not just striking up a conversation and telling us about his brother in Australia for the sheer pleasure of getting to know us. He tried to win our trust, wheedle relevant details out of us, in order to then pitch his sales talk as to which of his tours we should do and why. And he did a very good job.

He told us to forget about the temples for the moment, telling us that mornings really were not the best time to go there. But he would happily sell us a ticket, just to make sure we were booked in, and gave us a price. We took his advice and realised an afternoon would be much nicer. Once we had settled on that idea, he continued: Perhaps we wanted to see the special Jain festival in the Jain Temple, only open to the public today? He had gauged us correctly. Of course we were interested! On the way, we would also be taken to other important attractions in Mumbai: the hanging gardens, the tower of silence, and a behind-the-scenes look at one of the biggest and most successful enterprises run in the slums of Mumbai. He then produced an official looking document to tell us this was all government-approved. He quoted two prices, highly recommending the more expensive version which involved an air-conditioned car, as the heat would only increase over the next couple of hours.

Of course we couldn't resist this unique opportunity and so decided to go with him, even though we both felt, friendly as he seemed, that he was also, clearly, a very cunning salesman. Indeed, on queue, and we still don't know if they were in on the act or not, two people from the Jain temple appeared to bless us with flowers, a strand of orange wool and a red smudge of sandalwood paste on our foreheads underlining the specialness of it all (for a simple donation of a few hundred rupees).

As soon as we had agreed, he waved his hand, and out of nowhere, the man you see in the picture, which we later got to know as Hassan, appeared. We were taken to his car that was parked two streets away, and we heard the boss give him instructions for where he was to take us, and also that he was to try and sell us the main slum tour on the way back.

Hassan was lovely. His English was very good. He first took us to a slum area where the laundry of most of the city is done. There were rows of great big concrete tubs, "home made" big mechanical washing

machines, and he explained how they manage to not mix up the thousands upon thousands of pieces of washing and hang them to dry without the use of pegs. Then he took us to the next site, a beach where fishermen and their families live in ramshackle huts, eking out an existence with nets full of polystyrene for boats from a shoreline lined with trash.

He pointed across at another slum area, just across the water, and told us, proudly, that this was where he lived, with his wife and baby daughter.

While in the car, we got him to fill in his personal story a bit more and discovered he'd come to Mumbai as a street child, and had found shelter with an English charity where he'd learned English. His parents were still alive and living on the other side of the country, and with his current job, he was able to send them money occasionally. He filled us in on the details of his pay, the cost of living and his dreams to build his own tour business.

He took us around gardens and landmarks, pointed out historic buildings, as well as the latest apartment high-rise building where the very wealthy make their home. He told us about a family of five living in a seven-storey high-rise building, the most expensive house in Mumbai, with 600 servants at their disposal and a helipad on top. In three hours, he gave us a breathtaking insight into the complexities and contrasts of this megacity of over 20 million people.

When he took us, as promised, to the Jain temple, I asked him what his religion was. There were prayer beads dangling from his rear-view mirror and he confirmed what I had assumed: that he was a Muslim. But not practicing, he said, like most people where you come from, who don't practice their religion. He was born into a Muslim family but was no longer actively involved.

When I told him I was a Christian Priest, he smiled his big, warm smile and said: "Maybe you can bless me before you go?" When he showed us the Jain temple, it was clear he was at home there, and when I asked him, he said that he often went to Hindu temples, and many Hindus would also visit mosques "for blessing". When I asked about Church, he looked puzzled and said, "They are only open on Sundays, and only for a short time....".

Reflecting on the passage from 1 Corinthians this week, with this experience still fresh in my mind, it struck me that the community Paul was writing to lived in a city not dissimilar to modern day Mumbai.

Corinth was, as Mumbai, a thriving international port, teeming with life, full of people looking for opportunities, traders, sailors, business people, from every layer of society, attracted to the city from every corner of the globe. A multitude of tongues, faiths and cultures jostling for space, with people indulging in every human sin, as well as achieving lives of unblemished virtue and morality.

With various layers of society, culture and religion mingling everywhere; an overwhelmingly complex mix of contrast, opportunity and diversity.

I imagine Hassan's boss would have received plenty of admiration in Corinth - a smooth talker with a knack for making things work for everybody, while realising a good profit for himself. The successful business people living in the expensive high-rise apartments lining the bay would also have been admired, and even the families running the successful laundry business in the slums would have been the recipients of much admiration. And deserved it!

This is, however, also where the Church and world clash, according to Paul. Where the wisdom, which deserves admiration and commands respect in the world, is not necessarily what wisdom is in the Church, deserving of admiration and commanding respect in the community of the Church.

This is something the people of Corinth did not properly understand. Paul wrote to them because their community had been ripped apart by discord due to a thriving few who believed their success, wealth,

influence and status in the world, as well as their sophistication, made them better people who were more blessed than others and therefore closer to God.

Paul is at pains to make clear that in Christ, nobody can claim any preference or higher standing before God. All are equal, no matter what their status, wealth, education, gender, religious background, success or power base.

What is important, he writes, is not what counts in the world – smooth talking, business acumen, sophisticated learning or a high status in society. You know that the gospel I preached to you was effective not because of lofty words I used, my eloquence, or any special, secret knowledge. It is effective only because I simply and clearly spoke to you about Christ, and about him being crucified. I spoke from the heart, with not me, but the Spirit touching your hearts and minds with the message of the gospel.

What works in the world, says Paul, does not work in the Church. Status, education, sophistication and success are all categories that, when it comes to faith, lose their importance. When looking at the world through the eyes of Christ, when deciding what is important from the perspective of the crucified Lord, none of these things will hold any sway in the end.

Other things are important, things that cut right across those categories that are so important in the world outside, and turn its values upside down.

In faith, we discover that no matter what our differences are in status, gender or faith, God's love for each and every one of us is what is important. That God's welcome is equally open and generous towards all, equally forgiving and accepting, equally respecting and appreciative, equally calling everyone to live in the power of the Spirit and in imitation of Christ. Regardless of worldly achievement and understanding, all are called to a life that breathes peace, and practices integrity, harmony, healing and blessing wherever, and in whatever, circumstance it is lived.

Hassan asking me for a blessing moved me deeply, not least of all because of his self-evident trust that any blessing from any person of God would enrich his life and be worth having. He made me understand something about Christ I had not understood in that way before: That as in Christ, there is no Jew or Greek, as Paul writes, there is no Muslim or Hindu either. Whatever their faith, what should matter to a Christian is not what people believe, but how their lives and spirituality measures up when looked at through the prism of God's love and Christ's life.

The quiet dignity and pride with which he shared of himself and showed us his life and that of his community, his openness and self-evident trust and faith in God, as confessed in his many shapes and forms in the religions around him, struck me as truly Christ-like.

He impressed me, impressed us, with the fact that there was no judgment of the rich and powerful living in opulence only a stone's throw away from where others struggle with only shared toilet facilities and live electricity cables hanging within reach of children. There was an openness to others, trust and interest in their faith, without renouncing his own. There was hope, and a deep wisdom that spoke from the heart, believing that God's Spirit was at work, making things better all the time – not necessarily in a material sense, but also in a spiritual sense, with people sharing each others' cultural and faith realities.

In him, a lapsed Muslim with a tentative connection to Hinduism and other faith traditions, I believe, we met something of Christ. We were blessed to be able to spend time with him and look at his world through his eyes and see it as I imagine God would see it. A world of people living their lives where they find themselves, in society that obviously has many flaws and is full of grave injustices; living with integrity, dignity and generosity of spirit wherever the opportunity to do so arises.

What struck me is that, in the end, cruciform living, a life of faith, following in the footsteps of Jesus, speaks not with the voice of success, of numbers, of eloquence and power, not even through adherence to dogma or religious knowledge and sophistication, but through open acceptance of others, integrity, dignity, and a

peace of heart and mind that is able to communicate itself to the world around it. Living a spirituality open to God above, rooted in the world below, reaching out to whoever happens to be around. Amen.