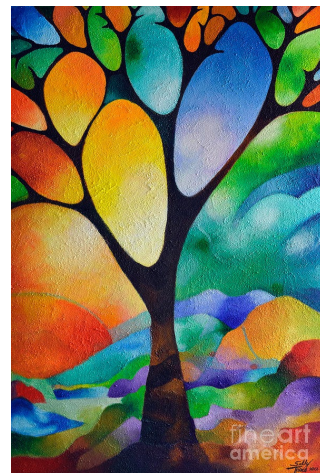


NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
BAPTISM OF SOPHIE VIERKE
SUNDAY 26 OCTOBER 2014
Rev. Anneke Oppewal
Matthew 8: 5-13; Psalm 1; Matthew 22: 34-40



“Like a Tree that Bears Fruit”

The image of a tree planted by streams of water as a metaphor for a fruitful and fulfilling life can be encountered in many cultures. It is pictured on the walls of old Egyptian temples, it has a strong presence in Celtic spirituality, and it can be encountered in Indian and Asian religious art. It seems that, in the collective consciousness of humanity, the image of trees growing tall and strong on the banks of a river or a stream represent something that we can all relate to, and are familiar with.

It doesn't matter much what sort of a tree it is, or if it is growing alongside a wide river or drawing water from a trickle, a tree, to all of us, is a powerful symbol of endurance and resilience, of fruitfulness and fulfilment, of abundance, long life and strength. And perhaps that is not surprising. Trees tend to live long lives, they are strong, and able to weather storms, droughts and floods and whatever else nature throws at them in a remarkable way. They provide shade and living space for all kinds of creatures, provide nurture and care, and seem to be forever renewing themselves, shedding leaves or bark and growing stronger as the years go by.

So the use of this imagery in Psalm 1 is not really new or unique to the scriptures. It is picking up a metaphor that occurs all around the world. With a different twist though.

The tree in biblical imagery will never be just the strong, healthy, and successful life of an individual, bearing the fruits of health, wealth and wellbeing. It will always be connected to community, to people sharing in justice, healing and peace. When the bible conjures up the image of the tree of life, it always imagines it full of life, sharing of its resources, providing shelter, caring for other creatures that it may find living amongst, in or underneath itself. That's what the bible is on about when it talks about righteousness. It is a way of life that takes others into account and puts the wellbeing of others and the building of community at the top of the priority list.

In the New Testament, that image of the tree, of the life of the righteousness bearing fruit, is taken a step further when Early Christians start to refer to Jesus, and his death on a cross, as the ultimate symbol of a tree planted by the streams of life and getting its nurture from the living water of God's love.

On the cross, the Christian story sees new life grow from death. The cross bearing fruit not only for the individual identified with it, but for the whole world and all people.

Like the image of the tree used in Psalm 1, the great commandment as it is quoted by Jesus in the gospel of Matthew is also not unique, nor is it a Christian invention.

Jesus quotes from an ancient text in Leviticus, which may go back to roots that are even older than the bible. Similar commandments are found in other cultures, and in other religions as well. To love God and the neighbour is again a general, ubiquitous occurring statement that most, if not all religions and cultures around the world, would probably wholeheartedly agree to.

In most human societies, love for God and the neighbour are seen as building blocks for a society where some kind of ethical imperative and some kind of mutual interdependence between people will hold everything together.

What is unique about Jesus, however, is that he goes a bit further than most in what he defines as love and as neighbour. So much further that it often clashes with our instincts for self-preservation, for what we understand to be fair, or what can be regarded as general common sense.

It is easy to see it would be a good idea to be nice to the neighbour. It may be a bit more challenging if that neighbour is to include people we don't like or who are unfriendly, unhelpful or who may even pose a threat to our health and wellbeing.

In the story of the centurion, a man who was an enemy comes to Jesus. He is a soldier, an officer in an army that was ruthless, cruel and without mercy. He was from an army that had been involved in atrocities against Jesus' people more than once and over a significant length of time.

Most of us will conveniently forget that when we read the story. He seems such a nice man, after all, and in the end he proves his heart is in the right place. The people in Jesus' day, his friends, his family and his followers, would most probably not have seen him that way.

Where we, after decades of peace, and little or no experience of oppression and violence by aggressive, foreign armed forces, tend to see military or ex-military as nice, decent people, whose job is to help, and keep peace rather than fight and kill, conquer and subdue.

To a Jew in Jesus' days, the Roman Army was definitely not such a benign entity. Yes, part of their duties was to administer the empire if there were no other officials to do it. Yes, they were engineers with incredible technical capabilities, designing high standard infrastructure wherever they went. But they were also cruel, unpredictable, and hated by those they suppressed. They represented, more than order and tidiness, violence and death. They were the oppressor, the other, the enemy.

I wonder what you would do if an Islamic State militant rocked up this morning and asked us to pray for the healing of one of his mates. A highly unlikely scenario I admit, but, as I see it, probably closer to what happens when this centurion approaches Jesus, than when we imagine what would happen if a nice and neat member of the Australian armed forces walked in and asked us for help.

The crowds would have stirred uncomfortably and with animosity at the approach of the centurion. What will Jesus do?

Not what anyone would have expected!

"Shall I come and heal him?"

There are a couple of things in that comment that need unpacking:

Apart from the fact that entering the centurion's home would have been entering the lion's den. It would not have been safe. One wrong move, one impolite move, could cost you your life. And one would dread to think what could happen if Jesus had not been able to deliver.

But not only that, it would also have rendered Jesus ritually unclean. It would have separated him from his own community, his family and friends for as long as it would take him to go through all the rituals involved in making him ritually clean again, and that would have taken a couple of days at least.

Apart from rendering himself unclean, Jesus' course of action would not have resonated positively with his family, his friends or the crowd that was following him. Who wants to hang out with a friend of terrorists? And be seen to be helping them?

Healing a paralysed Roman soldier? Really? What for? So he can return to duty and kill a couple more Jews?

Jesus does not ask for a change in behaviour, profession or allegiance. He doesn't ask for anything. All he does is offer healing, to put himself at risk, to enter this man's house, even if it may get him into significant trouble should he do something to antagonise the Roman authorities, or with his own people who will not like him for hanging out with the enemy.

In amongst all the news this week, there was a lot of us and them, of confidently pointing the finger, of knowing who the enemy is. The cruelty and terror of the Islamic state in the Middle East and across the world has triggered fear and the cry for retaliation across the globe. In all of that, one item drew my attention. Because it was counter-intuitive I guess, and because I was reflecting on this story for the sermon this week.

Instead of threatening imprisonment and prosecution, Denmark has started to offer jobs and support to those who return from a stint with Isis. The same country that, in the second world war, had the best track record in protecting Jews. And I wondered if they, once again, were getting something the rest of the world is not. And if it may be closer to what Jesus does in the story we read this morning than some of the other responses we see around us.

What Jesus does, in the story, is counter-intuitive. It is stretching the concept of neighbour further than we instinctively feel safe with, or further than common sense would deem prudent.

He offers to hang out with the enemy at home. He is prepared to risk his own wellbeing and safety. He is prepared to go against the grain of what his community expects, and puts his friendships and family relations in jeopardy, to help the enemy.

It is mind-bogglingly challenging to imagine what that means for us if we say we want to follow Jesus.

Then suddenly Christianity is no longer about living a nice, neat, middle-class, secure suburban life. Then Christianity becomes about taking risks, about extending care, compassion, being open, and giving help to others who are way out of our comfort zone. Others who may even be a potential threat to the safety and the wellbeing of us and our community. Our friends may not like it, our family may object to it, the authorities may try to convince us that other, more drastic steps need to be taken. With the only truly Christian answer to that being that we practice love and compassion first, and ask questions about feasibility and our own security and comfort later.

I've been involved in interfaith dialogue long enough to know that such an approach bears fruit, and offers a place of shelter and nurture where community and mutual care and understanding can grow. Challenging at times, and uncomfortable, but in the end more life-giving and peace-generating than the instinctive withdrawal and animosity that we see growing around us everywhere at the moment.

What we want for Sophie, what we want for the future, is not more segregation, fear, suspicion and prejudice ruling our lives. What she needs, what we need, what our world needs, is reconciliation, a genuine desire to understand, to build bridges, to come together.

What is needed is an openness like Jesus practiced, trusting that love will prove to be stronger than death, that compassion can defeat hatred in the end, that peace making is possible if we are prepared to make ourselves vulnerable. We need to be as vulnerable as Jesus, who gave his life for the love of others, opening his heart and hands to even the most unlikely and unlikable person he came across. Amen.