

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
SUNDAY 19 JULY 2015
Rev. Anneke Oppewal
Jeremiah 23:1-6, Psalm 23, Mark 6:30-34,
53-56



“Tired by the Sea”

Today’s reading brackets two stories. The first story we read, and reflected on, last week. It is the story of Jesus needing a rest, and instead ending up with him feeding bread and fish to 5000 people. That story is followed by another attempt by Jesus to have some rest. He sends his disciples off in their boat, while he goes up a mountain to pray. However, when on the mountain, he sees his disciples in their boat struggling with rough weather. He interrupts his prayer time and walks across the sea to come to their rescue. Together they sail on to the other side, where, as we heard in the last part of our reading today, he is once again swamped by people in distress.

There is no end to the neediness that Jesus encounters!

And, watching the news and reading the papers, or even from just talking to family and friends, we all know that that has not changed. When it says that Jesus was filled with compassion because the people that followed him were like “sheep without a shepherd”, I think none of us will have trouble imagining why.

There is, in this passage from Mark, no rest for the good. There is only compassion, putting well-deserved rest and much-needed prayer time on hold.

Ever been there? I have, and it is a difficult place to be. Because there is a fine line between putting yourself and what you need on hold for a bit, to help where help is needed, and letting yourself be overwhelmed, heading down the path of burn out, where you’ll be needing help yourself to ever be able to help anyone else again.

Jesus, seeing the need, feeds, walks on water, heals and comforts everyone who comes to him. Amazing stuff.

The Kingdom of God is taking shape wherever he goes. The world that God longs for shimmers through the bleak reality of a broken world wherever Jesus appears. The law and the gospel are shared in abundance, bread and fish aplenty for everyone. The disciples, straining at the oars, struggling on the stormy seas, are joined by God in Jesus, smoothing out the threatening waters of death under foot. And, as we have heard today, even the touching of the hem of Jesus’ cloak is enough to heal anyone and everyone who reaches out for it.

But that’s not where it stops. Jesus, God, does not leave it there. The feeding, the help, the healing and comfort of those in need, of all those people wandering around like sheep without a shepherd, are no more than stops along the way to something else. All the gospels are very clear on that. For all the time he walks the earth, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, on his way to the cross. The feeding, the helping, the healing and the comforting are merely signs of something far bigger and more important that is still to come.

Wherever the broken realities of the world are touched by Jesus, healing, comfort, abundance and peace happen. But his call, in the end, is more than to make a difference to the lives of those who happen to meet him along the way. His call, the difference he will make is to reach beyond the shores of lake Galilee, beyond miracle meals and abundant healing, into the very fabric of our broken world.

All through the scriptures, and especially in the prophets, we see this coming back again and again: God's healing, support and comfort making a difference in the lives of God's people is one thing, but for the Kingdom to come, more is needed. The structures need to change, the systems of injustice and oppression that fail to address the suffering and brokenness need to be exposed. And that's where we hear Jeremiah this week, and Amos last week, railing against the powers that be. Against leaders that don't look after their people, scattering the flock and doing evil. All through the scriptures, there is a raging, a crying out against bad leadership and governance, and standing up for those who get run over by them.

The bible, in that sense, is an extremely, and unapologetically political book. It doesn't back down for authority, it doesn't shrink away from controversy, it doesn't mince its words when it comes to denouncing evil, injustice and abuse in any shape or form.

Remember Amos last week? After he's been told to shut up and go somewhere else by the high priest, this lowly herdsman and dresser of Sycamore trees tells the King that his wife will end up a prostitute!

And this week? Jeremiah tells the leaders of Israel that God will "attend to them" and take their power away because of their abuse in no uncertain terms.

When Jesus comes, something else happens. In him, God touches the earth in a different and even more radical way than he has done before through the prophets. There is an abundance of compassion, patience, healing and persistence. The cursing ceases, the proclamation of God's imminent, violent judgement on perpetrators of evil is replaced with boundless, deep and profound love, with compassion that puts his own needs on hold, attending to the needs of those who suffer first, and thinking about himself last.

God has come to try another way; a way different from what most would have expected. A way different from what comes more natural to most of us than the way Jesus lives on his way to the cross. Cursing, violence, calling fire and brimstone down from the heavens above to those who fail to lead this world to fulfilment of God's promises, is, in a way, much easier than what Jesus does.

Railing against the injustice of it all, the unfairness, and letting your anger spill over is one thing, but living the dream and exposing the systems that prevent that dream from changing the world in every corner, and being prepared to pay with your life for doing it, like Jesus is, is another.

What the gospel and the prophet Jeremiah tell us this morning is that feeding, helping, and healing, however miraculous, is not enough.

Psalm 23 is an image of that reality, that world that we long for and are waiting for. A world where God's presence is felt in every aspect of life and healing, and abundance of food and comfort is a matter of course.

What Jesus went to the cross for is to show that, even though healing and abundance were generated wherever he went, it was not enough. There was more that needed change. The cross in that sense is a judgement of the leadership and the powers of those in charge, exposing the systems of governance of this world for what they are: self-serving and not interested in attending to the sheep.

Nothing much has changed in this respect since Jesus' day. I don't know how many times that sentence from the gospel came to mind this week when I was watching the news, involved in Church meetings, following assembly proceedings, participating in pastoral conversations, and listening to the sadness and difficulties of friends and family. "Sheep without shepherds".

Life is hard, and many of us are still reaching out to get in touch with even the tiniest little sliver of God's presence in our lives because we need the healing, support, comfort and peace that only God can give.

Leaders, systems and structures are still not geared towards bringing God's Kingdom to earth, but they are ruled by fear, greed, arrogance and hard-headed focus on self-preservation. Kings haven't changed since the days of Jeroboam; leaders haven't improved (much) since the days of Jeremiah; the politics of power and self-serving injustice still sacrifice those who they perceive as a threat on the altar of expedience.

In the middle of all of that, we are called to follow Jesus. To live with the same compassion, generosity, patience and persistence as Jesus did, and make God's Kingdom take shape on earth through our words and deeds wherever we go.

But not only that.

We are also called to stand up and speak up, if need be, to expose the structures and systems of this world that fail to address the suffering, or worse, maintain it and profit from it. To speak up for the vulnerable and refuse to believe that we can't do any better than a world where millions suffer, where injustice is rife and where hypocrisy reigns.

How? Not (only) by cursing and railing against the powers that be like the prophets did. What God showed us in Jesus is that love, compassion and forgiveness is far more effective than anger and rage can ever be.

One word of caution though:

We are not Jesus. The New Testament tells us that what he did was unique and that his death on the cross was enough. What the gospels testify to is that in Jesus, the powers of this world try to kill the Kingdom of God itself. And in doing so, show their hand.

Jesus is not just any innocent victim, but one who feeds the crowds on law and gospel, who calms the sea of death that is threatening God's people underfoot, whose touch heals everyone and anyone reaching out to him, whose boundless compassion and care know no end.

The reason he ends up on the cross is because the shepherds that should be looking after their flocks not only fail to do their job, but feel so threatened by the different reality that Jesus lives, that they feel they need to get rid of him.

We are not Jesus. And we don't need to be. His life does not need to be lived again, his death doesn't need to be died again. All we are asked to do is follow in his footsteps, hold out our hands to receive the guidance of the law and the gospels so that, where we share bread and fish, what we have to give will multiply abundantly.

Where the weather gets rough along the way, we may cry out and depend on his support.

And where we encounter flocks of scattered sheep, we heal and help where we can, but we count on him to be there with us to strengthen our efforts.

We are called to look after the sheep, but at the same time we are those sheep. Scattered, vulnerable, fragile, in need of his healing touch.

In and through all of that, God continues his journey to Jerusalem. The new Jerusalem, exposing structures that cause harm, and calling to account leadership that kills.

The world is still broken, the words of the prophets still ring true. There still are, everywhere, sheep without shepherd, people hungering for justice, crying out for help, reaching out for the touch of the healing presence of God. Innocents are still crucified, prophets still gagged and shut down. Politics is still as inadequate and corrupt as ever, killing, maiming and destroying people in an orgy of violence and death.

However, through Jesus Christ, through his life and death, we can see and reach out for another reality that seeks to take shape among us. A reality that says that it need not be that way. That God is with the victims,

with those who suffer, and that God will not let go. That love will win, love has won. That there is a different way.

We are not Jesus. And we don't need to be. Because we know that even where we, where our world, turns on him and tries to kill him, God is still there, looking at the world with boundless compassion.

Seeing sheep without a shepherd, brokenness that needs healing, hunger that needs feeding. Raining down fire and brimstone on those of us who fail to make his way a reality is not his style. But that love is his style, and life, vulnerability, and a new beginning, even after everything has gone completely pear-shaped with us. Even the violence perpetrated at the cross was not beyond redemption. Amen.