

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
SUNDAY 17 NOVEMBER 2013
Rev. Anneke Oppewal
Isaiah 65: 17-25, Psalm 46, Luke 21: 5-19

“God Our Refuge and Our Strength”

I've had a roller coaster of a week this week.

I know, I don't usually bother you with personal trivia like that, and I won't now. It happens to all of us. And there really is no need to share the personal detail with everyone when it does. Especially when you are a preacher.

On Thursday morning when I did my compulsory ethics training at the Presbytery that was one of the things we were told: That there need to be clear boundaries in the life of a minister between private and public and that Sunday worship or Facebook is not the place to go into personal detail most people could do without.

We also talked about how difficult that sometimes is. Especially in times of trouble. As a minister, to keep the private and the public separate. To keep going with a smile on your face when at home things are falling to pieces. Or to stay strong and detached when your heart is breaking for someone or something in your congregation. To keep your emotions in check, because you feel you need to be dependable, responsible, and reliable at all times.

After years of working as a minister I usually don't think twice about these things. It has become second nature to put other people's emotions first, and to refrain from sharing too much of the personal day to day that is going on the other side of the fence (literally).

Every now and again though, things become so intricate and entwined it is hard to say where one stops and the other begins. And sometimes it is just plain impossible to switch off, detach, contain, defer or otherwise stay in control.

Weddings, Baptisms and Funerals are of course prime occasions for emotions to make their way to the surface. And, because you're ready for it as a minister, you are, usually able to keep your own emotions in check while tending to the emotions of others.

But there are times that are far more tricky. Emotions around events that are more unexpected, and less common than rites of passage will sometimes get to me. And as I understand, to any minister who has an ounce of feeling left in them.

This week I found myself caught by an unexpected surge of emotion a couple of times. And, reading the scripture passages for this Sunday, realised that this time it may be important to share some of that surging of emotion with you. Because I believe it has as much to do with you as it has with me.

First: Typhoon Haiyan hitting the Philippines. At first I found myself ignoring or avoiding the news as much as I could. I even left the room on Monday night when others in my household were watching the footage on television. “Mum, you have to see this” Freke said, “It's really bad”. As if I didn't know! Walking the dog on Tuesday morning to my surprise I suddenly felt tears running down my cheeks. . Thinking of those terrible images, and the Philippines I know, I wondered if and how their families would be affected, wondered what it would be like to be there, now.... in the middle of it. But not only that. With it came

images and memories of the time of the Dutch floods of 1995 when we had to flee to safety and the memory of panic and the anxiety surrounding it.

On Tuesday night Marcel Koper came to talk to elders about trauma and trauma response. And on Thursday I heard him speak again, on the same topic, at the CTM, to colleagues. That second time we talked about what happens when, as a minister, people in a congregation make life impossible for you. Or, if, as a minister, you're confronted with a congregation that is going through traumatic events. We talked about bullies and what bullying can do to you, even when you're grown up and feel you should be confident and strong enough to deal with it. We talked about what is happening with Special Circumstances in congregations that are affected, like ours. We talked about congregations where the minister unexpectedly died. We talked about congregations in areas affected by bush fires.

How any one trauma event is never just that, but always related with other things that have happened or are happening in people's life, both to the people affected and to those who find themselves in the position offering support or help.

Catching up with colleagues after the seminar all sorts of things started to tumble out. With most of us admitting to having experienced some or all of those things at some time in our ministry, either as victim or in the role of support person. With usually little or no personal support to help us help others get through them.

Thank God for Bethel I thought, and thank God for North Balwyn Uniting Church who has made their property available for this important ministry. Marcel and his colleagues are needed. Badly.

Of course I went home ruminating about all the trauma I've seen and been subjected to in the Church over the last 30 years in ministry. Everything you can think of, and worse, will happen in a Church, and especially once you become part of the complex structure of committees that run the Church, it can be hair raising what you encounter as a minister.

Then the news about the twins being in a life threatening condition on Friday morning completely threw me. Friday morning. Deep in thought and prayer I snapped at an unsuspecting member of the congregation who only tried to be helpful, and as I sat down to a cup of coffee to still my soul suddenly the tears could not be held back any longer. At that point I phoned a friend and told her, still sniffing, that I could not tell her what was going on, because most of it was confidential, but that I had trouble focussing on my sermon and that it needed to be written within the next three hours, because I had a couple of meetings later that afternoon, and really wanted to attend Ross' valedictory service at the CTM after. (That again was an emotional occasion, but very positive this time)...

She burst out laughing and asked did I think I was maybe expecting a little bit too much of myself? Take a bit of time, she said, be gentle.....

It helped, 5 minutes later I was back to writing the sermon. This sermon..... and thinking about Jesus and Isaiah, and the scripture passages we read today.

Wondering how on earth we can hold on to the dream, the vision, the magnificent words of hope and faith Isaiah writes in the middle of a world where extreme weather kills thousands, where the Church is under so much pressure it hurts and damages its people and congregations, where things happen in people's lives that are so terrible that they are beyond words? A world where it should not really surprise us that 1 in 4 Australians are suffering from depression at any one time? A world, a life, where so much sadness and suffering, in our own lives or that of others, keeps hitting us, all the time, until we are just too tired to keep it at bay?

In that sense the words of Jesus sounded more familiar than those of Isaiah. The destruction and devastation he prophesies about in this passage are all too familiar, making some of us wonder if there will ever be an end to it.

What we need to keep in mind though is that both Isaiah and Luke write after the apocalypse has happened to them and their people.

Isaiah and Luke write from a situation after their country and the magnificent centre of their religion, the temple, has been destroyed and their country laid waste in a way that probably closely resembled what we have seen on TV this week in the Philippines. And not only that, both will also have been writing with the collective memories of a massive earthquake that hit the Mediterranean in 766 BC and killed thousands if not millions in its wake.

These people knew what destruction looked like, and what despair felt like. Both Isaiah and Luke knew what it meant to lose all hope, all prospect of a future, and be plunged into a collective state of numbness, disbelief, disempowerment, grief and suffering. Both the Assyrians and the Romans were very thorough if they decided to wipe some enemy or nation from the face of the earth. And there are indications that that Earthquake in 766BC wreaked devastation on a scale that has not been seen since.

And yet. Isaiah writes these beautiful words:

I will rejoice in Jerusalem,
no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it,
or the cry of distress.
No more shall there be in it
an infant that lives but a few days,
or an old person who does not live out a lifetime;
for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth,
and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed.
They shall build houses and inhabit them;
they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.
They shall not build and another inhabit;
they shall not plant and another eat;
for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be,
and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.
They shall not labor in vain,
or bear children for calamity;
for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord —
and their descendants as well.
Before they call I will answer,
while they are yet speaking I will hear.
The wolf and the lamb shall feed together,
the lion shall eat straw like the ox;
but the serpent—its food shall be dust!
They shall not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain,
says the Lord.

It is a statement of faith, a creed, dragging himself and his people out of the morass of suffering by strands of hope and faith where there really isn't any in sight, anywhere.

A similar thing happens in Luke. After all the destruction and suffering that will happen is acknowledged (and by the time Luke writes it already has happened), there is that one statement:
"But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls"

Or, with the words of Psalm 46:

God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.

Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

I don't know about you, but somehow that comforts me. Even in the midst of all the roaring and trembling and tumult of the world around me. That as far as three thousand years back others have struggled with these things. Been confronted with situations that were hard to face and difficult to negotiate, emotional, heartbreaking, soul destroying situations, within and without the community of God's people and still found their feet, their faith, their voice, their hope, their faith, their trust to help them through.

That there is a bible full of voices telling me that although all these things happen, although tears may be rolling down your face, and you may feel despair and depression lay in wait in a hidden corner of your mind, hope is still at work, love is still at work. That there is refuge and strength. Amen.