



ST HELIERS CHURCH
& COMMUNITY CENTRE



TAKEAWAY SUNDAY SERMON

Sunday 14th May 2023, Easter 6

Speaking truth to power by Rev Dr Jordan Redding

Isaiah 59:15b-19

The Lord saw it, and it displeased him that there was no justice. He saw that there was no one and was appalled that there was no one to intervene, so his own arm brought him victory, and his righteousness upheld him. He put on righteousness like a breastplate and a helmet of salvation on his head; he put on garments of vengeance for clothing and wrapped himself in fury as in a mantle. According to their deeds, so will he repay wrath to his adversaries, requital to his enemies; to the coastlands he will render requital. So those in the west shall fear the name of the Lord, and those in the east, his glory, for he will come like a pent-up stream that the wind of the Lord drives on.

1 Peter 3:17-22

For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil. For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight lives, were saved through water. And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

So, if you were here last week, you will remember we were talking about suffering and the way that our woundedness can become a source of healing for others in the world. The more we walk with Christ, our Wounded Healer, the more we become wounded healers.

But one of the things I didn't really address – the elephant in the room – was the underlying cause of suffering that Peter was responding to. As I mentioned last week, Peter is writing to slaves suffering under their masters. And his letter more generally is addressed to Christian communities who were victims of xenophobia, persecution, even death simply because they confessed Jesus Christ as Lord. In both cases, suffering arises because of the violence and abuse of other human beings; and because of the systems and structures that enable and institutionalise that abuse.

Take slavery for example. It would have been unthinkable at the time to imagine a society where slavery didn't exist. This abusive and dehumanising system was integral to the functioning of Roman society. And likewise, today, the systems and structures that enable our society to function can also be dehumanising, oppressive, enslaving.

So, it raises the question, what difference does the resurrection make to these larger structural evils at work in society? Evils that are beyond the control of any one person or group of people. It's all good and well to profess that the resurrection of Jesus transforms our own personal suffering – but if it doesn't address the underlying causes of that suffering (like the system of slavery) – well, it all rings a bit hollow doesn't it?

For the early church communities living in constant fear because of rising persecution, even death, what comfort is there for them in the advice to simply suffer gladly? That can only go so far. Which is why Peter, in our reading today, wants to assert that Jesus is more than just our fellow sufferer. He is that. Jesus isn't simply the one suffering alongside us, equally powerless in the face of evil. Rather, for Peter, Jesus' death has broken the system. In his death, Christ has entered into the very pit of hell where evil itself resides so that even there God reigns, love wins. Death itself dies.

As with other New Testament authors, Peter is describing here a deep mystery that can't so much be grasped as entered into as an act of faith. Words escape us. He gives it his best shot though. And as with other New Testament authors, he draws on Jewish literature to find images, stories, motifs that help us to enter the mystery of Jesus' death and resurrection.

Take our reading today for example: “[Christ] was put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, in which he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in the days of Noah did not obey...” There's a lot going on in that one sentence... and there are so many questions. For instance, who are the spirits in prison? Why is Noah being brought into this? And what is it that Jesus proclaims to these spirits?

I confess that in trying to answer these questions this week, I went down a real rabbit hole and ended up in a very weird place. Here's where I got to: ...the key to interpreting this passage is what Peter's referring to here. He's drawing on a particular strand of Jewish apocalyptic literature contained in the Book of Enoch. Now if you're wondering why you haven't heard of the book of Enoch, it's because it's not part of the Bible. The book of Enoch was likely written between the Old and New Testaments and was widely circulated in the Judaism of Jesus' day. So, the churches Peter was writing to would have been familiar with it and known what he was referring to.

It's a strange book, that's for sure. I read it this week and it makes for a wild ride! Up there with Revelation. You know in popular culture, there are all these stories about angels and demons. Like the Archangel Gabriel, or fallen angels like Lucifer. Hollywood has done very well out of these mythological figures. They originate in Jewish apocalyptic literature like Enoch.

So, here's the summary: Enoch describes the events leading up to the Great Flood and Noah's Ark. Most of us are familiar with the story of Noah's Ark. As the story goes, the wickedness of humankind was so great that God was sorry he had made it and sent a flood to cover the face of earth so that only a faithful remnant would survive. Well Enoch tells the same story but, it's fair to say, with a lot more creative licence. According to him, a number of fallen angels wrought havoc over the earth, stirring up violence, teaching the ways of war, and distorting God's good order of things. War and evil and violence plagued the earth. And so, the good angels make a plea to God to fix things, to step in and re-establish justice in the world. Which God does. He commands the good angels to bind up the forces of evil, to imprison these demonic spirits beneath the earth, and to then get to work healing the earth, making it right.

The great flood is the means by which God's justice is poured out, bringing an end to these demonic forces of chaos and evil and opening up a way for healing and new life. With me so far?

Now at this point, Enoch enters. The evil spirits are imprisoned beneath the earth and the prophet Enoch is instructed to go down into their prisons and preach to the imprisoned spirits that their power has been broken, that they have been defeated, that God's justice reigns on earth as in heaven...

So this is the backdrop to Peter's comments in our reading today. He is likening Jesus to the prophet Enoch, who goes down beneath the earth and proclaims to the forces of evil, and violence, and war that their reign has come to an end. That God's justice will be done as surely as Christ now stands before them.

It's a powerful comparison. And for Peter's listeners who were victims of violence and persecution under forces of evil beyond their control, the significance wouldn't have been lost. In short, Peter places their disorienting experiences of persecution and death within a larger narrative of hope and victory over death. A narrative in which God has not abandoned them but is dismantling the forces of chaos and bringing justice and peace. Things may look grim. But through Christ's resurrection, all things are trending towards life, not death.

All of this may seem rather farfetched to our modern ears. Fallen angels, and prisons beneath the earth – surely, we don't believe that? Well, in a way that misses the point of apocalyptic literature. Apocalypse literally means unveiling. And so, the purpose of apocalyptic literature is to unveil the true nature of things through image, metaphor and story. To show us how things really are.

And that's what Peter does. He lifts the veil. And names things for what they are. He is saying unequivocally that the systems of Empire have no place in God's future. He's saying that the structures built on a foundation of slavery, oppression, and inequality have

no place in God's future. He's saying that the xenophobia and violent forces that endorse persecution of minority groups have no place in God's future.

I use this word carefully but – Peter is suggesting I think that these forces are nothing less than demonic, less than human. That's not to give human beings a free pass. But it is to say that these ways of violence, abuse, and systemic injustice in the world are fundamentally at odds with God's good intentions for true and authentic human life together.

And Christ shows us that. In his compassionate living and in his selfless dying. His true and authentic humanity. Through his victory over these forces, Christ reveals them for what they really are and names them as such – preaching to the imprisoned spirits, “your day is done.”

I've been thinking about what this all means for us. There's a sense in which we too, as followers of Jesus, are to follow him into those hellish places of our world and preach truth to power. To suffer alongside the voiceless and the persecuted and to say “no more”. “No more” to systemic violence. “No more” to injustice. “No more” to war. “No more” to Empire. For Christ is risen and reigns as Lord.

I want to finish with an example. For my postgraduate research, I studied the work of a Swiss-German pastor called Eduard Thurneysen. And Thurneysen was closely associated with the Confessing Church in Germany during World War II. The Confessing Church was a movement that arose in opposition to Hitler's National Socialist regime. The movement published the Barmen Declaration which asserted in no uncertain terms that Jesus is Lord. And because Jesus is Lord, the Confessing Church utterly rejected allegiance to Hitler, to the Nazi State and to any form of Christian nationalism. The Confessing Church spoke truth to power and the confession led directly to its persecution. Not only that, but many in the movement worked tirelessly to help other persecuted minorities escape.

Towards the beginning of the war, thousands and thousands of Jews poured over the border into Switzerland. And in my research, I read about how Thurneysen was part of a network to fundraise for refugees, to host them when they came over the border, and to aid them on their journey further south.

As time went on, Switzerland became overwhelmed by wave after wave of refugees. And generosity and goodwill began to wither. Anti-refugee rhetoric began to abound in Switzerland as we see in many parts of the U.S. and Europe today. Thurneysen and other leaders in the church exerted huge efforts in countering that narrative of suspicion and fear and preaching instead a narrative of compassion and love, even to the point of self-sacrifice. They spoke truth to power.

The situations we face today are different. But the call is the same. The Christ we follow is the same. As we are carried by God through the chaos and turmoil – like an ark through the flood – there is a challenge for us to place ourselves on the side of the persecuted and the voiceless, the weak and overlooked, the abused and powerless and to speak truth to power in the name of Jesus Christ whose justice and peace is coming on earth as in heaven. Amen.