

# 24<sup>th</sup> January 2016

## Sermon by Rev Elizabeth Richardson

### Epiphany 3C

Imagine being a member of the small Israeli population in Jerusalem a generation after most had returned from the exile in Babylon. That was well over 500 years before Jesus was born. Life had been tough for those who returned. They had had to rebuild their city and then finally, in the time of the second generation, the walls were repaired and made secure. Life could now start to become more comfortable if comfortable is the right word. Religious practices had dwindled because life had been so hard and the leaders who had originally known about such things had long since died. In exile, many had drifted into the religious practices of their captors – it was safer and easier.

Now they had a copy of the old biblical texts but few knew much about them. Some of the people agitated for the texts to be read to them and explained. Only a few were educated enough to read. This was not a case of the educated leaders saying “now hear this...”. This was a grass roots movement hungry for knowledge and for God. And so, for six hours, the texts – or the most important parts of them – were read aloud to the people. Then the scriptures were explained. It was an emotionally charged time. The people started to recover the knowledge of God that had been lost to most and they also established regular worship.

It would be good to be able to think that the people never looked back but that was not the case. Throughout history, people have been diverted from God by the secular world around them. Even those who appear to be religious, are often seduced by the charms of the secular world.

Move forward to Jesus' time and again we have a situation in which many of the leaders are looking to their own comfort. They are part of the Roman Empire and so have to do as they are told. It is a time for keeping in with the rulers, not stirring up trouble. At the same time, many in Israel were looking for the promised Messiah who would overturn the Roman rule so that they could be independent at last.

In the town of Nazareth, a boy had grown up and become a man working in his father's trade of carpentry. Then he had moved away from home to the area near the north of the Sea of Galilee. News trickled back that this man, Jesus, had started to teach new lessons and was doing amazing jobs of healing. One day, Jesus was back in Nazareth and, on the Sabbath, he went as normal to the synagogue. He took his turn at reading from the scriptures. He chose a short passage from the book of Isaiah chapter 61. It was familiar to the people – they had heard it many times but this time was different. Jesus read: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.”

If the congregation didn't pick up the implications of this from the way he read it, they must have from his comment afterwards: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing". Clearly, Jesus was saying that HE was the one sent by God to bring good news to the poor.

Next week's reading will deal with the violent reaction. But let's now concentrate on the impact those words would have to the congregation. Listeners could no longer think that good things would happen in the future when God was ready. They could no longer think that in the meantime, they could keep going in the old ways and not worry about the poor, disabled and elderly. Jesus was telling them that it was up to them, at that time. They had to make the changes that were wanted. WE have to hear the words as saying to us - it us up to us, now.

Jesus was saying that the Kingdom of God is something that happens in THIS world. Jesus was a faithful Jew and knew the scriptures well to the point that they were part of him. We can't ignore the Hebrew scriptures or Old Testament just because Jesus came and brought his message. He assumed that all understood the scriptures and he made it clear that he was upholding the words of the scriptures. The book of Isaiah had written of the kingdom as very much this world but this world at a time in which all people would live a full and long life, all would have food and live in contentment in their own homes. Now Jesus was making it clear that the people had to take responsibility for creating that kingdom.

The American scholar, Harvey Cox, says of the Kingdom of God, that it is not intended to be a static place but rather an actively occurring kingdom. He prefers to use the term "Reigning of God". So he then says that "To be a 'follower' of Jesus means to discern and respond to the initial signs of this 'happening' and to work to facilitate its coming in its fullness. To follow Jesus, however, does not mean to be a mimic. It means to continue in our times what he did in his". (The Future of faith, p45)

Now, Jesus drew attention to injustices in that society and we are required to draw attention to injustices in our society. That doesn't always go down well, especially when some leaders have vested interests in maintaining the injustice. Cox goes on to say that "virtually all Jesus' parables are about the dawning of this Kingdom and the change of heart people would need to notice it and live in it, even though its coming had only just begun."

Two writers of the past half century, have put our position far more elegantly than I can so I'll read from them. First, from Henri Nouwen:  
"So many terrible things happen every day that we start wondering whether the few things we do ourselves make any sense. When people are starving only a few thousand miles away, when wars are raging close to our borders, when countless people in our own cities have no homes to live in, our own activities look futile. Such considerations, however, can paralyse us and depress us. Here the word *call* becomes important. We are not called to save the world, solve all problems, and help all people. But we each have our own unique call, in our families, in our work, in our world. We have to keep asking God to help

us see clearly what our call is and to give us the strength to live out that call with trust. Then we will discover that our faithfulness to a small task is the most healing response to the illnesses of our time.” – Henri Nouwen

The second is from Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador who was killed in March 1980 because he stood up for the poor of his country. He said:

“It helps now and then to step back and take the long view. The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts; it is even beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God’s work. Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us. No statement says all that could be said. No prayer fully expresses our faith. No confession bring perfection, no pastoral visit bring wholeness. No program accomplishes the church’s mission. No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about. We plant the seeds that one day will grow. We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations that will need further development. We provide yeast that produces effects far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for God’s grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker. We are workers, not master builders – minister, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own. Amen.”

We can’t take on every injustice or need in the world. Not even all those in our own city. But we can pick one or a few and do what we can with those. We can sow the seeds of change. We can prompt others to work also for justice. We can show up those who cheat on the rest of society with corruption or self-interest. We can point out to those who haven’t thought about issues, just what needs to be done.

Two days before Australia Day it is worth remembering some of the moves for justice that have been achieved in this country. All struggles for justice took time, sometimes decades.

A film showing at the moment is Suffragette. It tells the story of the women’s suffrage movement in England from a working class point of view. In Australia women were allowed to vote earlier than the English. Even so, it took a while for all white women of all classes, whether property owners or not, and from age 21 and, more recently, 18, to get the vote. Many decades later, aboriginal Australians were able to vote. That was a matter of justice and many church people in Australia were involved in the fights. But did you realize that the vast majority of white men in Australia could not vote until the 1850’s? Why should settlers in the country not have a say in how it was to be organized and administered? Today we think it strange that social class mattered so much. That gender could determine the level of education one would be allowed to have and so on. Women were not allowed to obtain a university degree until

the 1880s in Australia. Of course there are still countries in the world where such inequalities are very much in force.

And in Australia, we know that for many people, race matters, religion matters and money matters. What can we do about it? For many people there is fear of the strangers, the refugees and those who wear different clothes. What can we as Christians do about that? Can we truly follow Jesus who said: God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free. Remember Henri Nouwen and Oscar Romero – we can't change all the wrongs but we can make a small difference in one or two areas. So do that and do it well. Amen.