

Sermon by Rev Elizabeth Richardson

22nd January 2017 - Wesley 10.30am - Epiphany 3A

When Jesus heard that John the Baptist had been arrested he moved to the Sea of Galilee. Our translations use the word 'withdrew' as though Jesus had escaped from danger. Was he a coward? No, definitely not.

To start with, he wasn't escaping to a wilderness area - the area around the sea of Galilee was heavily populated at those times. There was a ribbon development of villages along the fertile lake shores where both agriculture and fishing meant that the residents had a good food supply and enough after feeding themselves to trade outside the area. In fact, Jesus was going to an area closer to the headquarters of Herod Antipas (the ruler of Galilee and Perea as a client state of the Roman Empire. He built his capital Tiberias on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee.)

Another reason for Jesus to go there, according to Matthew, was that a move to the northern area of the Sea of Galilee was in accordance with the Isaiah passage we heard earlier.

Finally and most importantly, the intention was to show Jesus' response to threats: it is not out of cowardice, self-preservation, or strategy that he moved, but a representation of Jesus' alternate vision of kingship, which is non-violent and non-retaliatory. It is a lesson in how to live – not to hit back or make an attack but to just go on working for others.

Jesus was about to start his ministry and needed a group of assistants and people who would learn what it was that he was teaching. After all, Jesus was teaching others, not keeping God's message a secret. And so he identified suitable young men and asked them to follow him so that he could teach them how to bring others to know of God's wishes for the world.

Jesus did not say "follow me and I will save your souls". He didn't say " follow me, and I will make you rich". He didn't say "follow me and I will make you popular". No, they were to follow and learn from him so that they could work to help people. Jesus was not appealing to any selfish ideas in these men. There were no great career moves being promised. In fact, they were to give up on their secure family based work to launch out into the unknown.

And those men were prepared to give up their job security and family to go with Jesus and become his pupils. At that stage they didn't understand what it was that Jesus was saying or doing. It must have been the person of Jesus himself that was sufficiently impressive to encourage them to trust in him. They very much wanted to know more.

Now, if those first disciples were being trained into how to spread the knowledge of God's love and will for the world, aren't we supposed to follow suit? But, how do we go about it this year?

What does 2017 hold for us? There have been many concerns worldwide and only two days ago, President Trump was inaugurated. What will that mean to international relations? The Brexit vote is still to be implemented but many wonder what that will do to Australia's trade. Commentators raise serious concerns for world stability. Within Australia we learn of impending disasters like the bleaching of large sections of the Barrier Reef. ---
With all these issues, people have a variety of ideas as to how we should react. Even this morning in this congregation, there would be many different ideas and reactions.

Is it right to join in aggressive talk about the actions of other countries or other groups within our society? NO. Think back to Jesus and his reaction to the arrest of John the Baptist. He didn't lead an armed revolt. No, he got on with doing what God wanted of him, teaching and healing and extending God's message of peace. He chose a more effective way of making his point than violence would have been. He moved to the heart of the country which Isaiah had said would be the first to be liberated and showed love not hate.

On my fridge door, I have a quotation from Rev Martin Luther King. The quote echoes today's passage from Isaiah and reflects the message Jesus brought. It says:

Darkness cannot drive out darkness:
only light can do that.

Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.

Leading up to that in his speech, King had said:

The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral,
begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy.
Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it.

Through violence you may murder the liar,
but you cannot murder the lie, nor establish the truth.

Now, no one could say that King avoided trouble. What he did do was to lead marches which he planned to be peaceful. He spoke up about inequalities and injustices. He encouraged others to work for justice. He did not set out to start riots.

Two other quotes from the Rev Martin Luther King:

Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.

Cowardice asks the question - is it safe?

Expediency asks the question - is it politic?

Vanity asks the question - is it popular?

But conscience asks the question - is it right?

And there comes a time when one must take a position
that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular;
but one must take it because it is right.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Taking a position that is right is what Christians and many others of good will do to achieve justice in society.

In his Boyer lectures last year and repeated almost two weeks ago, Sir Michael Marmot spoke of the causes of inequalities of health and well being in society. He wants to encourage governments to work for greater equality and does not believe in doing nothing himself. He referred to Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech and asked what would have been the outcome if instead of speaking of his dreams for a just society, King had said to the audience, "I've been told I'm in fantasy land – we should accept the status quo".

What strikes me from King's quote is his emphasis on light and love. Whatever happens this year and in the years to come, we must remember how Jesus showed love and compassion to others. How his way of saving the people of Galilee was to be with them, healing and supporting them. Speaking up for justice where he saw injustice. We should live life joyfully. Enjoy our children and grandchildren and encourage them to live life to the full. Take pleasure from the nature around us and do what we can to preserve God's creation. Work for a better world.

As King said: Darkness cannot drive out darkness:
only light can do that.
Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.
Amen.

Rev Elizabeth Richardson