

SERMON: Sunday – 13 March 2022 – Rev Alistair Cowper

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord

Philippians 3:17-4:1

Luke 13:31-35

O Lord

Breathe your life giving Spirit

Into our hearts and minds.

Through Jesus Christ we pray

Amen.

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.

Jesus spoke those words to the Pharisees who wanted him to protect himself from harm; not to go to Jerusalem and risk his life.

But Jesus was not to be put off.

The ancient words of the Psalmist, those passover words, greeted with palm branches and shouting; preceded by cries of Yahweh, hosanna, save us.

Yeshua. Save us. Jesus.

Jesus mission was to face Jerusalem and finish the work he came to do, to be the means of God's salvation; to make real God in human form.

And he came to do it in a way that didn't pander to the existing systems of religion but challenged the status quo in order to initiate something better. That something was the kingdom of God, the salvation of the whole world and the renewing of creation.

His voice was truly prophetic in the proper sense of the word prophecy, to speak God into reality.

It's worth reading Luke 13 as a complete chapter. We see how Jesus didn't treat everyone the same.

He warned the Pharisees and others against hypocrisy and greed and to them

he demanded that they repent rather than think themselves better than others like the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed in with other sacrifices or the 18 who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them. Somehow the Pharisees were seeing it as being their fault that these things happened. Blaming. Judging. Hypocrisy. Jesus hated that. Unless you repent you'll be worse than the people of sodom and Gomorrah.

But then there's the woman who'd been crippled for 18 years. Not for her is she asked to repent. J

But Jesus calls her a daughter of Abraham and her sins are forgiven.

Did the Pharisees prefer a pastoral leader more than a true prophet? One that would uphold the status quo in a triumphal way?

There is a tension between the pastoral and the prophetic in Christianity..

Religious scholar Diana Butler Bass writes of this tension between the pastoral and the prophetic when it comes to upholding the institutional status quo:

(SLIDE)

Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening*

“Religious faiths struggle between the pastoral and the prophetic, comfort and agitation. In a very real way, institutions are inherently pastoral...They reinforce the way things are (or were) through appeals to divine or supernatural order. They are always slow to change. Institutions resist prophets. Prophets question. They push for things to be different. They push people to behave better toward one another. They want change. The history of Christianity can be told as a story of the tension between order and prophecy. Jesus came as a prophet, one who challenged and transformed Judaism. A charismatic community grew up around his teachings and eventually formed into the church. The church organised, and then became an institution. The institution provided guidance and meaning for many millions. And then it became guarded, protective of the power and wealth it garnered, the influence it wielded, and [the] salvation it alone provided.”

I agree with her saying that Jesus came to challenge and transform but that doesn't mean Jesus came to start a new religion. I don't think he did.

But a new religion developed and became the institution we now know.

And the picture that Bass paints can read as quite a negative one but it isn't without hope. She goes on to talk about the rise of new prophets from within

the institution.

She writes this,

“Many of the people in the church did not seem to notice (the rise in institutionalism), but some did. What the church taught seemed at odds with their experience of life or God. . . . They questioned the way things were done. They experimented with new ideas and spiritual practices. . . . They bent the rules and often broke them.

The established church typically ignored them, sometimes tolerated them, often branded them heretics, tried to control them, and occasionally killed them. When enough people joined the ranks of the discontented, the institutional church had to pay attention. In the process, and sometimes unintentionally, the church opened itself up for genuine change and renewal. .

. .

(And she poses a question in closing with the words),

Organised religion fears such outbursts; but spiritual outbursts almost always precede real reform. Might spiritual discontent be today’s prophetic edge, needling institutions to listen, to change, to be more responsive and relevant?”

There’s no doubt there was spiritual discontent when Jesus walked into Jerusalem. Because we know there were people there and then prepared to drop their nets and follow him, however falteringly, one minute marching boldly, the next turning to flee.

But imperfect as they were, they were attracted to something pure and good and noble.

Likewise for us, there is an inherent goodness in Christ which we are wired to be attracted to; a hunger for justice, a yearning for peace, a desire to love, a blessedness coming in the name of the Lord.

The prophetic Jesus voiced Yahweh’s desire to gather her children to her like a mother hen gathering her chicks under her wings.

The question was, might still be for us today, are we willing to be so gathered? And if we are, might we then be given the means to gather others?

In his book, *Piloting Church: Helping Your Congregation Take Flight*, Cameron Trimble asks the question, “What is church really about?” (SLIDE)

Before going on to answer his own question with,

“I’ve always understood the church as being a community with a shared story in our scriptures, which binds us together. Church is about weaving relationships together so that life for all of us is more deeply rooted in Love. Today, I would offer that the church also offers a platform to work together to build a world that acts and advocates for the common good of all of us. We are warriors, lovers, peacemakers, protectors, prophets, thinkers, and dreamers who gather together to celebrate our heritage as children of God. At the same time, we are fearlessly willing to stand up and stand in for those our culture might oppress. When we live consciously aware of our power to shape our world for good, we live lives of meaning. We are our own most fully human and fully sacred expressions. We are whole. . . .

We have an opportunity in this moment of our great transformation. We can approach this time as survivors, desperately clinging to our structures and ways of being. Or, we can see ourselves as pioneers, setting out in the face of the unknown to discover new ways to live faith-filled lives. The inevitable decline of our structures gives us the chance to let go of what might hold us back from that adventure. Nothing today will be the same ten years from now. Why not architect the kind of faith movement we want to see twenty-to-fifty years from now? What do we have to lose?

Let me end with the words of Psalm 27:13-14,

I remain confident of this:

I will see the goodness of the Lord
in the land of the living.

Wait for the Lord;

be strong and take heart
and wait for the Lord.