

Sunday 15th July 2018 Ordinary 15 St. Luke's in the City

Reading:

Mark 6:14-29

Reflection

'Dear Lord, we would miss our greed if we were to abandon it. It keeps us warm at night. We do not even call it greed since we become accustomed to privilege and call it our right. Lord in our better moments we are able to pass laws that try to limit the harm we can do. Grant us courage enough to do so now; Lord smite us with boils of a minor-ish nature if we take a cautious approach to an urgent problem. You know our difficulty making short-term sacrifice for long term ends; you know our various cognitive biases that keep us passive in the face of looming disaster. Lord these things are hard-wired into us which makes them your fault - we ask you to keep this in mind and go softly with the smiting we deserve. Natural consequences will probably take care of that for you anyway. Dear Lord, sorry for waking you up with our wailings. Given our behaviour we prefer your silence to your justice. Amen'

Is this prayer familiar to any of you?

It actually came from Anglican Advocacy's Pizza and Submission Writing party last Monday evening, regarding the Zero Carbon Act and was printed in last week's Diocesan eLife.

What response does this prayer evoke in you? (Does it anger or irritate, stimulate or perplex? Can you say 'AMEN' ie. YES to it?)

In the current absence of a diocesan bishop, I have the doubtful privilege of approving the content of the Anglican elife newsletter each week. The prayer we have just heard caused quite some consternation among Anglican Centre staff, with some wanting the prayer omitted from publication. After prayerful consideration, I was happy to include it, honouring those who had formulated it and sharing my reasoning with staff.

The somewhat provocative prayer reminds me of some of the writings published by Michael Leunig – an Australian cartoonist, poet, philosopher and cultural/spiritual commentator. Like some of Leunig's writings, it evokes reaction, has a sting in the tail and offers a mirror I'd rather not look in.

Listen to this one:

'God be amongst us and within us. Earth is our mother and nature's law is our father, our protector. Thus, we pray.

Father do not forgive them for they know precisely what they do. Those destroyers of earth's beauty and goodness, those killers of nature, do not forgive them.

Those betrayers of nature's love. Those exploiters of nature's innocence. Those poisoners. Do not forgive them.

Those greedy, pompous people. That greed and pomposity within us all. The sum total of that petty greed and pomposity within us all. We now know precisely what these things are doing to this earth. So Father, do not forgive us for we now understand what it is that we do. Amen.'

Words evoking a reaction, with a sting in the tail, offering a mirror we would rather not look in. Thankfully, our pizza-munching submission-writers and Michael Leunig have not been beheaded for their challenging words, but John the Baptist – the forerunner of Jesus – certainly was.

After reflection on today's Gospel reading, I had two possible titles in *my* head for today's sermon:

'Losing your head for Jesus' or 'The seductive dances of Life'

What seductions draw you away from the way of Jesus?

Have *you* ever lost your head for Jesus? Have you spoken unpopular truths in the face of opposition, contempt or persecution?

A number of Jesus' followers certainly have. This month in our church calendar we remember Thomas More, the late 15th century English lawyer, social philosopher, author, statesman, and noted Renaissance humanist. He was of course, a councillor to Henry VIII, and Lord High Chancellor of England from October 1529 to 16 May 1532.

In that capacity, More supported Henry VIII's moves to reform the clergy. However, loyal to his Catholic heritage, he opposed the Protestant Reformation, in particular the theology of Martin Luther and William Tyndale. He consistently opposed Henry's plans for divorce and re-marriage to secure a legitimate heir and refused to accept the Act of Supremacy in 1535 that declared the king "only supreme head of the Church in England". He was beheaded for treason on 6 July that year.

Of his execution, he was reported to have said: "I die the King's good servant, but God's first."

As an aside, I was interested to read that one particular relic – Thomas More's hair shirt (which he wore as a regular ascetic practise) - is now preserved at Buckfast Abbey, near Buckfastleigh in Devon (I visited the abbey there in 2015).

But back to the hair-shirted, locust & honey-eating kinsman of Jesus who dared to speak out against Herod's unlawful marriage to his brother Philip's wife.

On the face of it, this is a strange story (recorded in both Mark and Luke, with some variations). Jesus is mentioned, but never says a word. Mark's Gospel is so short and to the point, but yet we get intricate details of Herod the tetrarch's marital situation and birthday party -Why? The retrospective account of John's beheading is sandwiched between the sending out of the twelve disciples – an extension of Jesus' own ministry – and the apostles' return to Jesus and reporting on their mission. It is also placed after Jesus' rejection by his home town, criticism and questioning over who he really is and what authority he comes under.

Does it suggest that the way of discipleship may conclude in suffering or even death? Does it remind us of the sometimes unpopular prophetic mission to which *we* are called? (Remember that the disciples were instructed by Jesus to shake off the dust from their feet when leaving those who would not welcome them nor hear their call to repentance).

The story of John the Baptist's demise points to the future fate of Jesus, the ultimate challenger of power and authority (in his case, at the hands of Pontius Pilate). It also points to the likely future fate of Jesus' disciples. It speaks as well, to the early Christian communities who first heard Mark's gospel – disciples attempting to follow the way of Jesus, living out their faith in the face of oppression and persecution.

So if you're John the Baptist, challenging Herod Antipas with your truth and irritating his unlawful wife, you'll be the victim of a young dancing girl and an impotent puppet ruler (a ruler who doesn't want to lose face in front of his courtiers, officials and leaders) and your head will be served on a platter. Dare I suggest we might recognise some parallels on today's world scene?

I can't help but recall the *figurative* beheadings I witnessed on my visit to Israel – Palestine in 2013: olive groves in Palestinian territory – the livelihood of many rural Palestinians – totally 'beheaded' – and left as impotent stumps; the apartheid wall and numerous road blocks disabling and disempowering so many; remnant Bedouin communities forced into resettlement and Israeli armed service. The latest of these attempts to demolish a Bedouin village – now suspended and pending appeal amid international opposition - was reported just yesterday in our Christchurch Press.

Any who challenge those in power – by word, action or simply the reality of their presence - often suffer significant consequences. They evoke a reaction and hold up a mirror that others would rather not look into.

Any of *us* can – like John the Baptist - be victim to the very worst life can throw at us, and sometimes even to the very worst in other people. And that's a message those in the first century, and we in the twenty-first century can relate to all too well.

I share with you another writing from Michael Leunig:

The Crowdless Man

See him wandering alone,
The crowdless man,
He has no group,
He has no tribe,
He carries his identity in his pocket.
His pocket has a hole in it,
His story has a hole in it,
His tragedy is not a tune you can hum.
His suffering and sacrifice,
They have no handles;
His persecution has no logo,
No shrine, no yardstick.
His joy has no credentials,
His observations have no fixed address;
There are no awards whatsoever.
His gaze and yearning are way outside the loop,
His pilgrimage has lots of holes in it.
See him wandering alone.
Beaming to himself.

Our fates are not what define us. Even though we may suffer and be cut down, we belong to God. When we manage to turn away from the dancing seductions of life, and perhaps even dare to lose our heads for Jesus (figuratively-speaking) we can feel particularly isolated. We may stand out in the crowd or be excluded from community. But God is with us – the divine smiles within us! Thanks be to God.

The Ven Canon Helen Roud