

St Luke's – Sunday, 27 January 2019

A sermon by the Revd Dr Ken Booth

Nehemiah 8:1-10

1 Cor 12:12-31

Luke 4:14-21

Watching the TV news in the evening and reading the paper, I am increasingly left feeling more and more cynical. And that is before I go anywhere near social media. I avoid that if possible. My cynicism stems from the way the news is presented. Another cynic said of news policy – “If it bleeds, it leads.”

More than that, I am reminded of the adage from Rudyard Kipling, “I keep six honest serving-men (They taught me all I knew): Their names are What and Why and When and How and Where and Who.” I’m not talking about the content of the particular news items; though reporters could apply those questions to some of their material before they think of publishing in some cases. No, I mean the very packaging of what purports to be news: What am I being shown? Are these the really important things among everything that is going on?; Why these bits rather than some other bits that fly under the radar (often the good news stories that never get told – why talk about teenagers doing great things when you can get more of a reaction from the troubled ones of whom we can say “How terrible! What is the next generation coming to?”). And ask, Where did this happen? So much of it is completely unrelated to Christchurch – and that’s just in *The Press*! Who? – who selected these bits and what is their skin in it? It all adds up to a serious realisation that the news is designed to deliver the maximum number of viewers and readers to the advertisers. That’s what it is about! Only Radio NZ escapes most of this, but they have their own priorities.

And how, in all the stories we hear can we begin to hear or see the signs of the grace and mercy of God? Where is the good news? I don’t mean the feel good stories of nice things happening – a kind of antidote to the horror stories. How do you begin to see signs of the gospel in a story of three young people wrapping themselves around a tree in their efforts to escape the police? Where’s the gospel news in the mess left-behind by a group of English tourists on our beaches and in our forests? What is there of good news in the latest strange pronouncement of Donald Trump? Now, there’s a challenge! But until we have learned to see the grace of God in all things, we haven’t grasped the gospel or our need to be like God and never write anyone off.

It may seem heretical (put your matches away for the moment till you hear what I have to say!), but some of the same cynical caution needs to be applied to the Bible. In particular you need to note Kipling’s six good serving-men. Take our first reading, from Nehemiah. Israel had been carried off to Babylon in exile. A couple of generations on and the only way of preserving the Israelite story was to gather up the written fragments – in Hebrew of course. But many Israelites no longer spoke Hebrew (did you notice the reference to a translator?). The story is now controlled by those who can read and write – the priests who have a vested interest in this story. It gives them power to control the returning exiles and to shape and identify of the life of the re-emerging nation. It is now focussed on a strict adherence to the law and woe betide those who stepped out of line. In the companion book of Ezra it is told that the Israelites are forced to get rid of their non-Israelite wives – and more is to follow. The story we are given here is the one told by those with a strong interest in encouraging this way of doing things, the very priestly caste who control the text and its interpretation.

Jump to the gospel reading. It is a very familiar story. Jesus goes to the synagogue and gets invited or invites himself to do the reading on the Sabbath. We hear the story as told by Luke – what, why, when, how, where, who? What is Luke trying to tell us? What is his slant? According to Luke, Jesus arrives back in Nazareth, well liked and approved of by everyone – a nice local lad doing good things. He does the reading. It's familiar stuff. God will make everything right in due course. All they had to do was keep on being faithful and obedient to the law and God would reward them and the year of the Lord's favour would come – if not this year, then some time, and Israel's enemies, like the Romans, would get their just desserts. But what's this? Jesus has just left off the last phrase from the passage from Isaiah! What happened to “and the day of vengeance of our God”? No wonder they all looked at him. But then he says “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” And they nod with approval – Bring it on, even if he forgot to add the bit about vengeance.

We of course know what Luke knows – that Jesus is himself the means by which the scripture will be fulfilled. Those in the synagogue don't know that – that is not how the story goes, and if they did think of it, it would be about Jesus raising an army to oust the Romans.

We didn't read what Luke tells us follows in the synagogue. According to Luke, Jesus then tells them that the good news he is bringing is like the days of Elijah and Elisha. Instead of helping Israelites, Elijah feeds a widow from Zarephath in Sidon and Elisha heals Naaman a Syrian. This wasn't the good news they signed up for! Is he suggesting that doing it literally by the book to keep Israel pure and undefiled is not what it is about? They try to run Jesus out of town – the idea that the grace and mercy of God reach beyond the paid up righteous and self-righteous and the letter of the law is too much for them. It is not about walls of purity but bridges.

As we look for signs of the good news of God's love in what read read in the paper and see on our TV, remember Kipling's six good serving-men. However, be warned, the all-embracing love of God will probably have us seeing good news and grace in places where many others won't. Do I need to remind you St Luke's people and commend you again for your ministry on Manchester St? Others are much happier to lock 'em up and throw away the key. Those who set the boundaries of God's love too broad are just run out of town.