

Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

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Fifth Sunday in Lent

2nd April 2017

Readings: Ezekiel 37: 1-14; Psalm 130; Romans 8: 6-11; John 11:1-45.

'Unbind him and let him go'

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.*

*All things came into being through him,
and without him not one thing came into being.*

*What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.
The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*

(John 1: 1-5)

As the prologue demonstrates, an important theme that runs through the Gospel of John is the idea of a new creation being established by God. The words 'in the beginning' link us with the creation story in Genesis, but here the emphasis is upon creation in Christ.

The Miracles of Jesus

The Gospel describes seven miracles or signs performed by Jesus as both revelations of God and demonstrations of the nature of the kingdom of God. They begin with the turning of water into wine at the Cana wedding feast and end with the raising of Lazarus, as read today. In order, the signs are:

1. Changing water into wine at Cana (John 2:1-11) – a sign of transformation and abundance,
2. Healing the official's son in Capernaum (John 4:46-54) – signifying the importance of faith which leads to restoration,
3. Healing the paralytic at Bethesda (John 5:1-15) – an act of compassion taking priority on the Sabbath,
4. Feeding the 5000 (John 6:5-14) – a sign of linked with the Passover and God's abundant providence (cf. the Exodus and manna in the wilderness),
5. Jesus walking on water (John 6:16-24) - demonstrating power over nature (cf. the Exodus crossing of the Red Sea),
6. Healing the man born blind (John 9:1-7) – opening our eyes to the kingdom, and
7. The raising of Lazarus (John 11:1-45) – the sign of new life.

Following the Johannine theme of ‘new creation’, some scholars argue that the seven miracles are parallels with the six days of creation plus the Sabbath, which expresses the sign of new life or resurrection.

Another important aspect of all the miracles of Jesus are that they are performed without expectation of payment or reward; indeed, they are freely performed for the benefit of others. This is contrast with other miracle workers of his day that charged a fee for their services (cf. Matt 10:8). The response to Jesus’ miracles is belief on the part of those who witnessed them.

Life and Death

This brings us to today’s Gospel reading and the last of Jesus’ miracles, which is the raising of Lazarus from the dead. The story is placed at the important middle-point of John’s Gospel. While Jesus is described as giving new life to Lazarus, the next part of the Gospel describes Jesus being condemned to death by the religious authorities. The Gospel then turns to the extended Passion narrative.

The juxtaposition of Jesus giving life and humanity seeking to take his life away is a most significant part of the Gospel. Jesus said, “unbind him and let him go” while at the same time others are seeking to bind Jesus and bring about his death. This provides a comparison between the way of the kingdom of God, which brings freedom and new life; and the way of the world, which brings oppression and death.

As followers of Jesus, living in kingdom of God, we are meant to bring freedom and restoration into people’s lives. Jesus’ conflict with the religious authorities of his day often centred on how they put unreasonable burdens onto the ordinary people, demanding obedience and conformity. I sometimes wonder if anything has changed over the past twenty centuries!

Seeing What Others Don’t See

It is interesting to note that the writer of the Gospel acknowledges that not all who witnessed the miracles of Jesus were either convinced by them or responded to them positively. While the sick and needy reached out to him, convinced that he could help, there were others who were not moved, did not believe, and therefore failed to recognise the presence of God’s anointed one. What made the difference?

The Gospel of John places special emphasis on the presence and work of the Holy Spirit in people’s lives and the answer lies here. In short, the Gospel describes the role of the Spirit as doing three things in the life of a believer:

1. It convicts a person of the sin and brokenness in their lives,
2. It glorifies the person of Jesus, and
3. It transforms believers into the likeness of Jesus.

This is the work of the church. In this season of Lent, we are encouraged to reflect on our sin and brokenness (to recognise that we are not perfect) and offer these things to God so that we may not be bound by them. In the Easter season, we will glorify Jesus through the recognition of his resurrection; and in the season of Pentecost we will seek to be transformed more into the image of Christ.

In all of this we need to remember that it is the work of God's Spirit within us that makes the process work. Moreover, through this we experience God's grace (or unconditional love), which gives us spiritual life, guidance, and an understanding of what it is to be a son or daughter of God. As it was for those who recognised God's presence in Jesus and who reached out for healing, so the Holy Spirit helps us to see what others do not see and to respond.

Giving Thanks to God

The Gospel describes, that when people received God's grace through the ministry of Jesus they responded in some way – often with belief, or by telling others, or by returning to Jesus to give thanks. Being thankful is a central part of what it is to be a Christian. Having received God's grace and providence, we are called to respond by showing that grace to others. It is part of the 'generosity breeds generosity' principle.

Our central act of worship is the Eucharist – a word that means 'thanksgiving'. At this time, we gather in response to God and to give thanks for the transforming presence of God's Spirit in the world. In doing this, we focus on the self-giving sacrifice of Jesus through which God reached out to the world in love.

We will recount over the next couple of weeks the story of God coming into the world in Jesus and the world's response by killing him. Power, greed and hatred appeared to win but it was not the end, for God responded with resurrection. The sign of the raising of Lazarus was a foreshadowing of the renewal and new life to be brought through the resurrection of Christ. In response, we are called to follow Jesus by not being bound by the ways of the world, but instead by being selfless, loving and generous.

The offertory in our worship is an act where we are conscious of responding to God – we bring incense as a sign of our prayers, bread and wine as the ordinary foods of life that will be used to bring spiritual life to us through Communion, and we give our monetary offerings as a sign of giving back to God something of value that can be used for God's ongoing work in the world.

As we approach the celebration of Easter, and in the light of thanksgiving, I encourage you to think about your response to God.