

Joshua 3. 7-17

1 Thessalonians 2. 9-13

Matthew 23. 1-12

I have to admit that my brain is a bit like scrambled eggs today. I have spent three days this week at a preaching conference called Preachfest. It was held concurrently in Melbourne and Sydney, with presenters from elsewhere in the world and many participants on Zoom around Australia, along with people attending in person in Wesley church in the city and St Stephens in Sydney. In particular we heard from Stan Grant, who spoke for an hour without a note – deeply, passionately, from the heart – and we were joined by an American Rabbi from Nashville, Tennessee; Amy-Jill Levine, a Rabbi who is a New Testament scholar. So, I'm full up to pussy's bow, and I want to tell you everything all at once, at the same time as I don't want to say anything; it just feels all too confusing and difficult.

To tell you the truth, it was the first preaching conference I have attended in 20 years of ministry and it confirmed, to some extent, that I am both equipped for this task, at the same time as I feel utterly ill equipped; most weeks. A feeling, a conflict, many at the conference also expressed in various ways. What are we doing when we get up here? What are you doing? Preaching in various ways has developed something of a bad press in our time. In a world of soundbytes and being constantly bombarded with images, we preachers wonder, have people got the attention span to listen any more? What has come to light through some surveys as part of the Act2 project, underway in the Uniting Church at present, is that church members value preaching highly. This is encouraging.

What do you hope for from preaching? You come, you participate in worship, some of you watch on line. Live streaming now makes it possible for Highfield Road members to watch online when elsewhere on a Sunday morning, or those who simply can't make it for various reasons are able to maintain a sense of connection. And I have valued your responses to what I offer each Sunday morning – I have a sense you value the reflection I try to offer. There is a sense that you are listening; not just paying attention like good children, but listening at a deeper level – for the life of God at work in your own lives.

Many of you attend to the texts for each Sunday across the week prior through *With Love to the World* or some other aid to devotion; some participate through Examine during the week, either on a Wednesday together with Wendy Lewis or in your own time. And then we gather on a Sunday; and we listen; we listen to these ancient, often strange, texts and put ourselves in the way of them; we adopt a posture both personally and collectively that these ancient texts will have something to say to us – even from their far distant context to our contemporary context. As we remembered last week as we marked All Saints' Day, we read together with saints who have heard these texts over thousands of years. We know that they speak to us of the eternal God and the human condition and, as we make space for the hearing and the pondering over these texts, we trust that the mystery that is God will be disclosed in ways that will touch us. How can this be, we might ask? How can this happen? But happen it does. The texts read our lives, open us up as we open the pages of this ancient library of texts.

Rightly, preaching gets a bad press when it's too didactic, too forceful, tub-thumping and insistent; where the preacher rails against personal peccadillos and fails to appreciate the ethical grey-zone that is the habitation of too many of us. Some of you might have read an extract from Richard Flanagan's latest book in the Age last weekend: *Question7*. Being interviewed about the book in yesterday's Age Richard says the title came from a short story by the Russian writer Anton Chekhov which parodies our tendency to reduce life to binaries: to either-or, this or that, good and evil, them and us. Flanagan writes that life is "never binary, nor reducible to cant or code, but a mystery we at best apprehend." When we sit under the preaching, both preacher, and listener alike, we adopt a posture by which we may apprehend some things about our own lives, about our life together, about the world we find ourselves in – in the light of the eternal God, found in Jesus.

Paul continues his tender letter to the church in Thessalonica; these people Paul addresses feel like his first love. There is a tenderness between the lines and he reminds them of their openness to the word which he and Timothy and Silvanus brought to them; the word *that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word, which is also at work in you believers*. This word we place ourselves in the way does its work in us.

Many of us will have been exposed to an approach to scripture which suggests that the Bible is the infallible word of God; a text in which there are no contradictions, and which is a kind of rule book. This is neither what it is, nor what it was meant to be. Some talk about the scriptures reading us; that when we read, we give ourselves over to them and, if we are willing to open ourselves as we read, our souls are read.

Jesus continues to be engaged with hostile groups around the temple. Some scholars suggest that Jesus himself was a Pharisee and that the hostility that exists between him and those the gospel writers identify as pharisees is actually an intra-religious tension.

Jesus denounces them to the crowds: *They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long*. Phylacteries are a little box which contains verses of scripture and are strapped around the head. They are an aid to devotion still worn by devout Jews today, an aid to memory; a tangible, outward reminder and sign that the wearer is seeking the life of God. The prophet Jeremiah anticipated a time when God would write his law upon people's hearts and there is a response we use in church in response to the hearing of the scriptures – *write your word on our hearts by your Holy Spirit*.

One of the things the Rabbi Professor Amy-Jill Levine emphasised as she talked with us at Preachfest was trying to avoid antisemitism when we read – both the Hebrew scriptures and the Christian scriptures – the new and the Old Testament as we know them. But what is going on in the tension we read of today between Jesus and the Pharisees seems to be an eternal tension, part of the human condition when it comes to the religious life; that we so easily lapse into legalism and binary thinking; the thinking that there is a right way, and our group has got it. Ultimately the horrors which have been unleashed in Palestine/Israel are the out-workings of the manias of religious fanatics. The rantings of clerics; a we are right – you are wrong binary;

because we are entitled to this land, you are not. The roots of this horror are centuries deep – and politics we know can't fix this.

Shortly, as we gather at the table, we will greet each other with a sign of God's peace; a peace which comes to us through the humiliation and degradation of the cross. As we have read over recent weeks, Jesus finds himself amidst squabbling religious elites: Pharisees, Sadducees, the political elites of the royal court, lawyers and scribes – all trying to trip Jesus up, catch him out, be able to accuse him of blasphemy - prove how he is wrong in the wrong, they are in the right and so justified as they move to erase him. Jesus knowingly gives himself over to these competing fanaticisms which are only satisfied when blood is spilt.

The peace we share at the Lord's table is the peace of the one who so fully apprehended the presence of God's love in the world and offers us a new and living way – a way grounded in humility and kindness; a practice of love of God, of self, of neighbour – sometimes in costly and life-giving ways.

Each week our context changes, the world changes around us, the circumstances of our lives change and we need to place ourselves in the way of the God who comes to us in spirit and feeds us with the one who is his word to us. Nourishing us and enlivening us. May God give us grace as we continue on the path.

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