

CHRISTMAS DAY 2023

Isaiah 52. 7-10

Titus 3. 4-7

Luke 2. 1-20

There is always contention in the church about whether the Gospel is political or not. There is usually push back of some kind when preachers are thought to be straying into politics. For many, religion is about private belief only and that both the church and preachers should limit their concerns to that; and that alone.

I'm afraid I fail to understand how this conclusion has been arrived at. Pesky preachers have been a thorn in the side of tyrants for some time. Henry II of England is believed to have said of Thomas Beckett, the Archbishop of Canterbury in the 12th century: "Will no one rid me of this meddlesome priest?". At this begging question, four trusty knights set out and assassinate the Archbishop. The pesky John the Baptist lost his head; Martin Luther King was assassinated because of his courageous and tireless efforts to free the USA from racism. And if you read the gospels carefully it is an ugly mix of the religious and political elite who bring about Jesus' execution. Jesus was always clear that to speak of the justice and mercy of God was to invite persecution. Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!

In many ways the stage is set for the confrontation of Jesus with the religious and political elites in the earliest chapters of the gospels. Mary's hymn of praise is a cry of the humble, longing for equity:

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.

And as the angel announces to the shepherds that a child has been born in Bethlehem, who will be a saviour, he is joined by in Luke's words, a heavenly army, proclaiming peace. Heavenly peace. Luke begins his account of the nativity in the context of Mary and Joseph living under the rule of the Roman Empire. This is a tyranny which has brought the Pax Romana – the Roman peace - to Palestine. The Pax Romana was bit like the bringing of democracy to Iraq. Some calculate 600,000 dead and political and economic disaster.

In a piece on the ABC's Religion and Ethics page in the last days Prof. Phillip Jenkins unpacks the violent political climate into which Jesus was born:

By 4 BCE, Herod the Great was coming to the end of a long career that was bloody and paranoid. He ruled through tactics of mass terror and widespread surveillance that sometimes sound like a foretaste of Stalinism. Herod had killed multiple members of his own family, and in the year 4 BCE was in the process of trying and executing his son

Antipater for alleged treason. He also systematically wiped out all male claimants from the dynasty prior to his own.

The dynasty of Herod's family were puppet rulers, who got their legitimacy from the Romans. They could rule violently with impunity – anything was permitted, or a blind eye turned, in service of maintaining the Pax Romana.

When Herod the great died there was a popular push for a change to the way Palestine was governed and how people were taxed. But there was open rebellion, calling for change, and so Herod's son Archelaus oversaw the massacre of thousands, suspected of being opponents.

We might ask of Mathew's gospel whether the massacre of the innocents really took place, all the children around Bethlehem two years and under being killed. Certainly, it is probable, given the paranoid ferocity of the Herodian regime.

We have all watched with horror as the events in the State of Israel have unfolded in the last ten weeks. To date there are more than 20,000 deaths and 50,000 people wounded. Two thirds of these are believed to be women and minors.

Israel has also stopped entry of food, water, fuel and other supplies except for truck convoys of aid from Egypt, which cover only a fraction of the needs in Gaza, this place that many call an open air prison of 2.3 million people. Power, water, sewage and communication have all been cut off. A child born this last week was killed the same day.

A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.'

Some are defending Israel's right to defend itself from Hamas. As though the attack on Israel by them was unprovoked. But the sustained oppression of the Palestinian people by the government of Israel – by explicit policy and also tacit tolerance of civilian vigilantes taking matters into their own hands, the theft of housing and land, the systemic oppression, has built to a crescendo. And the government of Israel, like Herod the great and his successors, have been able to act under the protection of the empire of our own time. Committing atrocities in an utterly asymmetrical response to the attack by Hamas.

This year is the 75th anniversary of what the Palestinians call the Nakba; the catastrophe. The Nakba took place on May 15 1948, when the State of Israel came into being, leading to the ethnic cleansing of Palestine. Between 1947 and 1949, at least 750,000 Palestinians from a population of 1.9 million were made refugees, pushed beyond the borders of the new state of Israel. Zionist forces had taken more than 78 percent of historic Palestine, ethnically cleansed and destroyed about 530 villages and cities, and killed about 15,000 Palestinians in a series of mass atrocities, including more than 70 massacres.

What has taken place in these last weeks has not come from nowhere but is the legacy of these events 75 years ago.

‘Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favours!’

In 1948, when these events took place news would have emerged from Palestine slowly. Taken maybe days if not weeks to get into the news, on the wireless, into the newspapers, maybe a page 3 or page 5 news item; or relegated to the International pages, deeper inside the papers. But for us, the events in Gaza today are in our living rooms tonight and we can only watch in horror, appalled by the ferocity and indiscriminate annihilation of innocent people.

As I was saying a couple of weeks ago, there is some kind of social contract we participate in when we watch and take in the news; when we are appalled, or have to look away or turn the volume down; when we shout at the TV or are simply reduced to tears. We watch, feeling like we have some agency, are somehow participating. But quickly feel powerless, impotent, overcome with despair. I know this is how I feel much of the time and some of you have expressed the same to me.

As I reflected on these things and wondered about my despair and disgust, and the question of what Christian faith has to say about this, a childhood hymn came to mind:

Jesus bids us shine with a pure, clear light,
Like a little candle burning in the night.
In this world of darkness so let us shine—
You in your small corner, and I in mine.

It's a children's hymn, written by Susan Warner at the end of the American Civil War, encouraging children to fight against wrong and for the propagation of the good, and true and beautiful. 750,000 Americans had just killed each other. *In this world of darkness so let us shine ...*

In Australia there is an organisation which supports the people of Palestine and lobbies on their behalf; a group that refuses to look the other way in the face of the atrocities being committed. A group committed to remembering the Nakba and not pretending, as journalists are often forced to by their editorial masters, that current events have somehow emerged out of nowhere. In her end of year message, the Chairperson of the Australian Friends of Palestine, Christa Christaki, writes:

We have been inspired by the mobilisation of so many people at rallies, and the activation of a multitude of initiatives from the grassroots. Palestinian, Muslim and Arab groups, human rights organisations, unionists, doctors, nurses, university and high school students and ordinary Australians from all walks of life, have mobilised and organised in an enormous show of support for the people of Gaza. We will continue to build on this extraordinary momentum.

While the Israeli genocidal war on Gaza continues to wreak death and destruction on the Palestinian people, Australia's leaders continue to lack the moral courage to reassess Australia's relationship with the apartheid state of Israel. This is shameful and intolerable.

In solidarity with the people of Gaza, Palestinian leaders of Christian denominations came together in Bethlehem and made a unanimous decision to cancel public Christmas celebrations. The Church of the Nativity, famous for its grotto marking the location where Christians believe Jesus was born, normally bustling with thousands of people, is empty. A short walk away, the Evangelical Lutheran Church has placed the baby Jesus wrapped in a keffiyeh in the centre of broken cement to symbolise children being pulled from the rubble.

You in your small corner, and I in mine. This hymn was not a call to private religion but to action when and where we are able to be active in the name and the pattern of Jesus, and his defiant mother and quietly courageous father.

The solidarity of Christian leaders in Israel, closing the church of the Nativity in an act of solidarity. The symbolic response of placing the infant Christ amongst concrete rubble are small acts, but acts which are seen. *When did I see you?* The response of Christians around Australia through the Act for Peace appeal for Gaza, is a way of individuals saying, yes, the USA might pledge billions, but we each in our small corner pledge our allegiance to Gods' reign of justice and righteousness.

Through the Old Testament there are numerous accounts of battles against foes of various kinds; neighbouring enemies, Philistines, and there are the difficult passages about the removal of Canaanites and a multitude other *ites* from the Promised Land. Difficult passages, because they claim God had called for these routings or enabled miraculous victories against much more numerous foes.

And then comes the Anointed One; Messiah; Christ. Not born in the palace but in an obscure, out of the way place, in dubious circumstances, to parents who were poor and, by all accounts, seemed to be nobodies. We still gather around his cradle, having heard the angels call for peace; heard the call for the divine peace which comes about by honouring the dignity of each other – because we believe we are all made in the image of the Divine One.

How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,
who brings good news,
who announces salvation,
who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.'

Jesus brings, what Paul calls, a new and living way, a way of being which breaks down the dividing walls, a way that calls for the costly act of reconciliation with enemy, that breaks down racial, economic and gender hostilities and makes peace through the cross. Jesus gives himself over to the Romans' instrument of terror; the cross and says to us: the violence can stop. You don't need to do this any longer. This is not the way your creator desires for you to live. Will you follow me? So, we do what we can. We pray, we speak without fear, we act where we can, and in doing so echo the heavenly army's song in all we are and do.

Andrew Boyle