

Read the Archbishop of Canterbury's sermon preached during Holy Eucharist this evening at St George's Cathedral in Perth, Western Australia. The Archbishop of Canterbury is visiting Australia from 5th - 18th October at the invitation of the Church of Australia.

First of all, thank you for the invitation to be here. And thank you for the welcome on to the land, to country, that was given at the beginning of this service. Thank you, Archbishop Kay, for allowing me to preach in your diocese and to Mr Dean for allowing me to lurk in your pulpit. Whether I preach or not, we will see at the end.

A Potemkin village: you may know the expression. A Potemkin village. Comes from the time of Zarina the Tsar, Catherine the Great, in Russia. When she went out into the country one of her former lovers, and she had many, used to be charged by those responsible for making sure they didn't get into trouble and nobody else got into trouble, to make sure that every village she went through that the main street was tidied up and the houses sort of polished and painted on one side.

If necessary, a frame put up in front of the houses that looked like a house so that as she went through, she saw how well kept Russia was, and how wonderful and happy the serfs in the villages were living in such excellent conditions. Behind the houses all was filth and sadness and terrible conditions.

A Potemkin church is that to which these words from the scriptures today are all addressed. For the work of the Spirit of God throughout both the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament and through the New Testament, the work of the Spirit of God is to bring to our hearts such passionate love for Christ that we are truly transformed. Not that we put on a nice front - and if I may say so you put on a very nice front here. I don't know what lies behind it, I'm not making assumptions. I'm not calling you a Potemkin church or cathedral.

But that rendering of the Magnificat was just beautiful. Absolutely magnificent. Thank you so much. The dance at the beginning. The welcome. The uncanny sounds of the digeridoo. Those were amazing.

But let's go back to what the Magnificat says. It starts with the well-known words of Mary praising God. In her weakness because God is faithful to His word. He scatters other people, all people thinking proudly, He brings down great kings sitting in high places, and He lifts up weak people. He's filled the hungry people giving them good things, but the rich he sent them away. Their hands empty. He keeps his word. Everything he told our ancestors, He has remembered us. He keeps His word.

Do you know in the East India Company in the 19th century before the events of 1856/57 in India, forbade the singing of the Magnificat at Evensong. If you're the ruler of an empire, do you really want to hear that God is faithful and that he brings down great kings sitting in high places? No, you really don't. There's no way of getting out of it so the best thing is just not to sing it. So as it was known at the time, John Company, made sure the Magnificat was not sung. Or read.

And our first reading is God appealing to the Israelites in the slave labour camps outside Babylon and saying to them, "Seek the Lord while He may be found. Call upon Him while He's near. Let the wicked forsake their way, the unrighteous their thoughts. For my thoughts later on are not your thoughts. Nor are your ways, my ways."

He is speaking to a nation: a Potemkin nation and telling them to, "Shape up and ship out" back to Israel. Through the gift of freedom and liberation he brought to them. And the Gospel. Jesus' extraordinary prayer - most magnificent, the Everest of John's Gospel. And John's Gospel is

the Himalayas of the New Testament. That's controversial, but I think so.

But in that so much is about "I, I, I" and it's about keeping the Father's word. And what it does is say, "This is a new people, a new nation". People though are no longer off the world although they're in the world. They belong to something different. They cannot be a Potemkin people.

And the functionality of that wonderful reading for Timothy which leads straight into the collect for this week.

All Scripture is inspired by God is useful - what an understatement - is useful for teaching, reproof, correction and training in righteousness so that the person of God, the person who lives in Christ, may be proficient, equipped for every good work. We are to be changed. And throughout history, and I said this this morning and I know if you were there at the meeting this morning, my apologies to you. But after all, most Archbishops only have one thought at a time and it takes a long time for the next one to find its way into what passes for their minds. I'm not talking about the Archbishop of Perth.

So often God is forced to call us to be the people we are. To be those who are transformed by the Gospel into something entirely different.

Not a Potemkin church, but a renewed Church that reveals Christ through the power of its life, the extraordinary nature of its love, the delivery of its witness and its unflinching suffering, extraordinary obedience to Christ and to Christ's word.

There are many things that we share in common in our history. The Bells, founded as a memorial to Queen Victoria. Your memorials to those who served in the wars of the 20th century. Your special service a couple of weeks back when the late Queen died, to remember her. Our countries are still linked in a shared history not congruent, but similar. Not entirely overlapping, but with common ideas problems and values.

But as in Australia, as in the UK, increasingly we are having to reckon with the consequences of our history. Of the things that in the UK we did here, we did to those whose country this is.

In Canada, at the end of April, I visited indigenous communities in northern Saskatchewan and near Toronto. Here in Australia I will be meeting with indigenous peoples, Torres Strait and Aboriginal people across this country and listening to their stories and learning.

Three days only I spent in Saskatchewan listening. Three days of solid repetition of agonising stories of oppression, of residential schools, of stealing children, of 250 unmarked graves found, 250 families who said goodbye to their child as the Mounties drove them away and never saw them again and were never told that they died. And that is only the first of the mass graves they've found. They're doing land searches to look for others. And here, I've learned very little yet but will go on learning, The Lost Generation.

Here at least, as I understand it, some people, leaders of the Church spoke out against that, resisted it. We cannot find such a record, tragically, in Canada, especially when it was still the Church of England in Canada. The stories of slavery. The Church of England, the Church Commissioners revealed, after an extensive audit going back to 1704, a forensic audit by Grant Thornton, that we reckon that in today's money the Church Commissioners made about £450 million out of slavery. So what are we going to do with that? Or do we just say, "Oops, sorry. Don't look behind the front wall of our village because behind it you'll find some really quite unpleasant things. Some awful things."

We belong, as Christians, to the world's greatest revolutionary organisation. In many countries to this day, to proclaim what the Magnificat says we'll get you arrested and thrown in prison for sedition and stirring up revolution. That is not the case in much of the secularised world, where when we say such things everyone says, "Oh, isn't the music beautiful?" But we live as members of God's nation, which is a nation of revolutionaries. Not of violent revolution, but of a revolution of the heart and life, which is the hope of our world.

Which is God's intention to be the hope of our world, which is called by God, that it may call the world to change and be renewed. And which when it does so, somehow, in an almost magic way, the scene behind the front walls of the houses ceases to be dereliction, abuse and tragedy, mixed with much good in many parts of the world, including here, but becomes a thing of profound beauty.

Because the Spirit of God renews us. And what we so often don't see in our history, as we've sought to tame this Gospel of revolution, to set aside the hopes of liberation for the poor, to say to Mary, "Oh, that's lovely. That's lovely. Let's put it in a book and keep it there." As we have sought to do throughout our history, sometimes with terror and torture, and sometimes with mere condescension, and patronising treatment of God.

When we've done that, we create our own misery in the Church. And we can all look back and know when that's happened, in our history, even in our present. But when we listen to those words of revolution, when we learn that although we disagree passionately with each other, passionately, vehemently, deeply, we will disagree well. When we learn that, then we have something to say to the world around.

To say no, to listen closely to God's word is not to become clones of each other, all spouting the same thing as if we were a sect, but to rejoice in our individuality, to embrace our mutual need for one another, to relate to one another and love one another in action and word and in so doing, to reveal Christ, and that Christ came from God.

A few verses later in Chapter 17 of John's Gospel, verse 21, that's what happens. And that's what happens in all sorts of places in the secular and the rest of the world. With the 83% of the world who belong to one faith or another. With the 2 billion people who belong to the Christian faith.

It is revolutionary and it revolutionises countries. It changes countries from saying, "Oh, if people come on illegal routes to enter our country in the UK, well, they'll get sent to Rwanda." As they said, earlier this year actually on Maundy, Thursday of all days. On the day we commemorate Jesus washing feet in the UK, and was said again, yesterday. "We'll send them to Rwanda". Oh, do we not have any legal routes? Well, there you are. Makes not using illegal routes a little tricky.

But we can change that when we show the love and hospitality of Christ. Nations can be reformed. Trends of decline can be reversed, but they will be only when we become a people of revolutionary love. And in small ways, it can happen.

The Lambeth Conference was at the end of July, early August of this year. There was much storm and noise in the run up to the Lambeth Conference about the issues of human sexuality. Some of you may remember it. Strangely enough, the church seemed quite fascinated by it. Strangely enough, so did the secular press. It had sex and it had disagreement – what more do you want to sell copies of the paper?

And when we got there, we found when the conference opened just enormous difficulties. It was publicly said that large numbers of people

refused communion on the first Sunday of the conference. There were two Sundays. And when we came to the afternoon when we were going to discuss the subject, we went into it with a distinct sense that the Communion could fall apart at any minute, there could be a huge walkout. We were close to it.

Many people outside the Conference were encouraging it for one reason or another, either because we were too conservative or too liberal. Or too something else. And at the beginning of that session, there was a speech. As it happened, I gave it but it wasn't all my words. And it was a speech in which we tried to tell the truth. That we all belong to Christ (or I tried to tell the truth) that we belong to Christ, that those who took different views belong to Christ. I've said it a million times before, and I'll probably say it a million times again. And I've no idea why God suddenly decided that this was a good moment to do something dramatic. But it was one of those rare moments, and some of you may know what I think I suspect most of you will, where the air felt thick with the presence of God. Do you know what I mean?

There was a heaviness. A beautiful, thick, wonderful heaviness about the room. I wasn't the only one who felt it. And I hadn't been drinking! It was commented on by so many. And at the end of the speech, for no particularly good reason that I could see, everyone stood up and there was a nice ovation. That was all very good. And suddenly and Archbishop Kaye and other bishops there will tell you, everything changed. We didn't change our minds at all.

Nobody I know of said I'm now convinced that same-sex marriage is a good thing and I've always been vehemently against it or vice versa. But people suddenly said I am now convinced that those I disagree with are my brothers and sisters in Christ. And in some strange way I feel a profound affection and unity with them. Not unanimity. Unity. I can tell you, an American Bishop came up to me, and said a day later or so, "That was a miracle!" And then he paused and said, "And I don't even believe in miracles!"

These four wonderful passages take us not to ourselves, because in ourselves there is emptiness and sin and decline. But to God who fills us with love, and hope, and purpose, and who transforms our world. Who can bring peace in Ukraine. Who can transform the people of South Sudan. Who can enable Myanmar to find peace again. Who can enable Anglicans to continue shouting at each other. You know, there are some churches well it's like families, isn't it?

There's some families that argue in infuriated hisses behind closed doors and then sulk for days. And there are others who go into the back garden and shout at the top of their voice. In Rome, begging your pardon of any Roman Catholics here, and I know of at least one, they tend to do the "behind closed doors" stuff. Anglicans go into the middle of the garden and scream at the top of their voices at each other. Fine! It doesn't matter as long as we love one another and learn to disagree well.

And when these words inhabit our hearts, they smash open a door to the Spirit, to fill us afresh with hope and life and revolutionary fervour to be carried out in love, without weapons, without oppression, coercion, manipulation. But simply for the good of the Church, the glory of God and the common good of the societies in which we live. And is that not a vision to dream off, to pray for, to hold to? That we disagree in love and say to a broken, shattered, war-ridden world, it is possible to be different and yet to be shoulder to shoulder in support of one another.

May God fill us afresh with a spirit of revolution.

Amen.

12 min read

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