

Loosing innocence Sermon for Pentecost7 -All-Age Service at St James
Today's Gospel is unlike any other in the 3 year cycle of readings and arguably merits an Ecclesiastical Health Warning. Neither Jesus nor God is mentioned by name. The explanation comes from something Nick explained a fortnight ago: it is the perfect example of Mark's technique of writing in sandwiches! Mark (or however wrote in tribute to him) would often break the thread of a story with an apparently unrelated story to add emphasis to his main thread. Today's thread began last week with sending out the disciples in pairs, apparently under-resourced, on their 1st mission. The thread will be continued next week with his description of their return, flushed with success. But today the thread is rudely interrupted by an alien event. It's as though we are at the end of the queue for a buffet and go to the plate which once had a stack of sandwiches, only to find the centre of one left- a slice of beef coated thickly with mustard.

Reading Mark 6 v 14-29, we may well ask "Why is Mark doing this to his readers, spoiling a thoroughly good, uplifting story"? It's been described as a time when *the mission of Jesus lost its innocence*

It is certainly a tale of lost innocence: the word used to describe the young female at the heart of the story is the one used elsewhere and translates to 'a 12 y.o girl'. This is a far cry from the sultry exotic dancer, beloved of film-makers. The pre-teenager is abused by her mother, Herodias: she, knowing her husband, Herod, had a soft spot for their daughter, shamelessly uses her to kill off her sharpest critic, John The Baptist. Herod is reduced to jelly by seeing his daughter delight the court with her party piece: having promised her anything she wished, he caves in to her grotesque request, not seeing where it was coming from. John's head ends up on a plate and the whole, unjust structure of power and privilege in Jewish society at the time is exposed at a stroke of Mk's writing tool. The only people safe were the wealthy, powerful few, who worked hand-in-glove with the real power-brokers-Roman overlords, who viewed their own emperor as God.

It was into such a world that Jesus had just sent his penniless Disciples out, with a revolutionary message: true power did not reside in Rome but with those being trampled on. In Mk's condensed storytelling, some might think that the disciples' trust was being abused by Jesus. Here they were, naively sent out to do their party piece for their new master, without being fully aware of what their high risk mission. But the disciples had been living in a bubble with Jesus and would have empathised with his view of the need for revolution; they and were prepared to take the risks. They were willing to lose their innocence and knew that the stakes were high! The mission was skating on dangerously thin ice.

As a church we aspire to engage in mission today: we have a special prayer we say to remind ourselves of our responsibility but do we appreciate the risks we need to take in a world where the levers of power remain in the hands of a few and often used to keep things that way. Are we clear about the message that we take with us? Richard Rohr, of the Centre for Contemplation, is in fine form with his meditations at the moment. He is has been recapping on the great themes of the Gospels, which have sadly been lost.

Our church activities on Sunday and through the week either keep our heads down or looking in the rear view mirror. We feel sandwiched between OT and NT, which each seem to contain mixed messages in places. The world hears much about the church's internal arguments about the rights and wrongs of homosexuality, slavery and the role of women in ministry. It hears about those that lose their innocence at the hands of its priests. It hears about its involvement in past wars.

What it doesn't hear, or better 'taste' is the meat in the sandwich. As Richard says
"The realm of God is right here, right now, in the present tense.
The relationship with God's love that sets us free is in our midst.
The possibility of freedom, of a whole new world, is already here.

The only moment that has any effect or revolution for us is when we acknowledge God's active presence in our lives and the power of unconditional love.

When most people say, "We want justice!", they normally mean that bad deeds should be punished or that they want vengeance.

But Jesus sent the disciples out, and sends us out, with a different message:
'God's justice is total, steadfast love, total unconditional giving of love.'

Our world is a fragile one, full of big challenges, albeit different from the ones that the disciples faced.

As modern writer, Brian McLaren, says

"we can't settle for a heavy and fixed religion. We can't try to contain the Spirit in a box. We need to experience the mighty rushing wind of Pentecost. We need our hearts to be made incandescent by the Spirit's fire. —

Our journey is the story of creation,

the adventure of Jesus;

the global uprising of the Spirit has come full circle.

It all came from God in the beginning, and now it all comes back to God in the end.

A will finish with a Lord's prayer for our times (from the NZ Anglican Communion)

Eternal Spirit,
Earth-maker, Pain-bearer, Life-giver,
Source of all that is and that shall be,
Father and Mother of us all,
Loving God, in whom is heaven:

The hallowing of your name echo through the universe!
The way of your justice be followed by the peoples
of the world!
Your heavenly will be done by all created beings!
Your commonwealth of peace and freedom
sustain our hope and come on earth.

With the bread we need for today, feed us.
In the hurts we absorb from one another, forgive us.
In times of temptation and test, strengthen us.
From trials too great to endure, spare us.
From the grip of all that is evil, free us.

For you reign in the glory of the power that is love,
now and for ever. Amen.

Neville