

The Fourth Sunday in Lent  
Year A - 22/3/2020

1 Samuel 16:1-13

Psalm 23

Ephesians 5:8-14

John 9:1-41

**In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...**

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want”... Psalm 23, verse 1.

In times such as these, our instinct as human beings; and especially as Christian human beings, is to cry out to God. To cry out in confusion, in fear, in anger, in despair. The psalms as a genre of Scripture really do have it all - the whole raft of emotions and responses of people towards God. And in times when people felt as though they had been abandoned or forgotten by God the raw honesty of their words is sometimes confronting. But it is always real; authentic.

This past few weeks, and the past 7 days in particular, have been quite extraordinary. The word “unprecedented” is one which has been used perhaps more than any other. And it’s right. Unprecedented for this generation, in any case - the threat to our livelihoods; the restrictions placed on travel and social gatherings; and perhaps even the threat to our faith.

At times of crisis and when people suffer, our instinct is to look for someone to blame - some way to understand and rationalise what is happening. And we, as Christians are not immune to this instinct.

What is important for us to remember today is that the God we know and in whom we trust has not changed. The God we read of in Scripture and experience in our lives is still God. “Though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling.....The Lord of hosts is with us” Psalm 46 so powerfully proclaims.

Earlier this year, the Archbishop of Canterbury wrote a foreword for the book “Saying Yes to Life”, by Ruth Valerio. The book was written to be used as The Archbishop of Canterbury's Lent Book for this year. And the words of Archbishop Welby in his introduction to that book are incredibly prophetic, given our current scenario. He wrote:

“The most frequent command in the Bible is “do not be afraid”. In that, God is not saying “everything’s fine, there’s nothing to be afraid of” when he commands us not to fear. He is acknowledging that life is scary, and that sometimes we are rightly afraid when we are faced with crises and difficult situations. But God is beside us, working with us in our communities, and our churches, and our politics, and our governments, and he will not leave us to face our fears alone.

This Lent is an opportunity for us to consider and respond to God’s call, to live a life that is caring and restorative. We rise to the challenge with optimism and perseverance, alongside our fellow Christians around the world, so that we might live lives that are led by Christ and shaped by the Holy Spirit, in deep reverence for God’s creation.”

I’m sure he had no idea when he wrote those words that optimism and perseverance were going to be quite so needed as they are now; or that allowing ourselves to be led by Christ and shaped by the Holy Spirit would be as critical as they indeed must be for us.

Put simply - we must do things differently. We must “be” different. There is no question in my mind that the steps put in place by our Government, and enacted here in the Diocese of Adelaide are the wise and courageous thing to do. But that doesn’t mean it is easy. Not by any means. I share the pain and hurt that others feel. I wonder and agonise about how we will get through this; and I, like many others I’m sure, am simply overwhelmed about how we are to proclaim the joy of the resurrection in a few weeks’ time when surrounded by so much uncertainty and fear.

So how do we really take to heart the command of “do not be afraid”? How can we be faithful to God’s call to trust; to abide (I love that word in John’s Gospel - the sense of remaining; resting; abiding in God’s love)? Even amidst all that swirls around us.

The radical American pastor and theologian, Nadia Bolz-Webber, helpfully reminds us of the image of Jesus as a mother hen - Luke 13. And whilst on the one hand it’s an incredibly nurturing and loving image, she points out that actually in the face of real danger a mother hen is somewhat limited in what she can actually do to protect us from the threat. As she says, “honestly, nothing actually keeps danger from being dangerous.” But what remains real in the face of all of this is the love that God, the mother hen, shows.”

The danger still remains - but our choice as to how we respond (with fear, or in another way) can change - we can be more aware of the love that God has for us, and choose to respond to the threat not with fear, but with the knowledge that we are loved.

Because the dangers of this world, the crises that may threaten to overwhelm us, do not get to determine the response of our hearts. Nor the content of our minds. Instead, may we be like the psalmist, who trusts enough to believe that our cup does run over, and that we will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

I finish today with the beautiful words of the Very Rev. Dr. Brian Baker, the Dean of Trinity Episcopal Cathedral in Sacramento, who wrote this: “The world now is too dangerous and too beautiful for anything but love. May your eyes be so blessed so you see God in everyone, your ears so you hear the cry of the poor, your hands so everything touch is a sacrament, your lips so you speak nothing but the truth with love, May your feet be so blessed that you run to those who need you. And may your heart be so opened, so set on fire, that your love, your love, changes everything.”

In the name of God. Amen.