

Sunday 22 April, 2018

A sermon preached at Evensong by the Revd Prof. Mark Lindsay, Associate Priest

Readings: Ezekiel 34: 1-10, 25-31, Hebrews 13: 7-19

Unless you've been asleep for the past few months, or otherwise disconnected from the 24/7 news-cycle, it's been nigh-on impossible to escape the almost-daily revelations coming out of the Royal Commission about massive corporate greed and the corrupt practices of senior executives in the Australian banking industry. We've heard stories emerge about banks charging fees-for-service for clients who have been dead for a decade; about credit limits being increased by over 500% for the long-term unemployed, and even for self-confessed gambling addicts. As *The Guardian's* Greg Jericho has said just this last week, none of these revelations should be a shock to us; rather, 'it is capitalism working as intended.'

How did we let things get so bad? How did we not notice the extent to which corporate greed had grown?

But let's not be too quick to pour out our confected outrage over just the banking sector. In the dark shadows of that other Royal Commission, the Church is hardly in a place to start casting stones. We too have been guilty of the most egregious crimes and the most appalling abuses against the weak and the vulnerable in our care.

Nor, if we look much further back into our histories, do things get any better. This last Friday, at Trinity College where I work, some of our students and staff were able to see and sign the Uluru Statement from the Heart – that heart-wrenching plea from more than 250 indigenous leaders, urging us, the non-indigenous majority, to acknowledge not only the colonial-era crimes against this country's First Peoples, but the continuing oppression, marginalization, and systemic disadvantage that they suffer even now.

The word of God that came to Ezekiel in today's first reading speaks to precisely these sorts of situations; situations in which the poor and the powerless are hunted and haunted by the powerful; situations in which the leaders have become the abusers; situations in which those who have been given responsibility to care for and tend the sheep, have instead devoured them.

Of course, this reading from Ezekiel refers most immediately to the crisis of the Hebrews in exile. The scattering of the Israelites and their capture by the Babylonians is, says Ezekiel, a direct result of poor and manipulative leadership. The shepherds of Israel – that is, the people's leaders – have been so busy exploiting the people in their care for their own greedy benefit, that they have failed to protect the land from the Babylonian threat. And so the sheep of Israel – the average punter in the street, the mums and dads and children of the land – have in consequence been forced to suffer twice over. First, at the hands of their own rapacious rulers, and second, at the hands of the imperial invaders.

It is into the chaos of this leadership vacuum, in the place of abusive and corrupt rulers, God promises to Ezekiel that he himself will enter the scene and be the ruler that the people should always have had; that he himself will be the 'good shepherd', a shepherd who protects and provides for the sheep, instead of using them for personal gain. No more shall they be scattered or left as prey to the powerful. On the contrary, God himself will gather them together, tending the weak and binding up the injured. And the sign of this, he says, will be that the people of Israel will at last live in a place of peace, stability and security.

'They will no longer be plundered by the nations, nor will wild animals devour them. They will live in safety, and no one will make them afraid. ²⁹ I will provide for them,' says the Lord, 'a land renowned for its crops, and they will no longer be victims of famine in the land or bear the scorn of the nations.'

This past week has seen the 70th anniversary of the foundation of the modern State of Israel – a nation created deliberately as a safe-haven and a homeland for the Jewish people. The re-birth of a murdered people out of the ashes of Auschwitz. A nation that was meant to provide for the Jews precisely that place of security, peace and abundance about which Ezekiel speaks.

It has not been so. Instead of peace and blessing, the modern-day rulers of Israel have, like their ruling forebears of Ezekiel's day, exploited and abused a new set of people – this time, the Palestinians of Gaza and the West Bank.

There is, indeed, nothing new under the sun. What has happened, happens again.

In other words, the failure and corruption of leadership, and the corresponding abuse of the weak and the powerless, is all around us: in the banks and other big corporations; in the politics of suspicion and oppression directed against asylum seekers and our own First Peoples; tragically, in the Churches; and even in that place where Ezekiel said that bad leaders would be replaced by good, and where abuse would be replaced by peace.

As the biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann has said, there is a 'contemporaneity' to Ezekiel 34, a currency of this text in our present day, because it reminds us of the acute leadership crisis in which we, in our own time, are caught.

The rich and powerful of our world not only control all branches of government but have established an alliance between corporate power and government oversight to the great benefit of the wealthy and the powerful and to the neglect of the "hungry sheep" who are once again left without resources.

To paraphrase Jesus, those who already have much, get increasingly more, while those who are already impoverished are deprived even of the little they have.

Well, to quote again from journalist Greg Jericho, we might be shocked by this, but we shouldn't be surprised. Why not? Because as the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews reminds us, 'We have no lasting city here, but we are looking for the city that is to come.' The solution to such corruption and

exploitation will not be found through the ballot box, or through the valiant but ultimately futile protests of activist groups like the 'Occupy Wall Street' movement.

Certainly, we, as Christians, ought fervently to hope and pray and work for the safety of the Jewish people. At the same time, however, we need to remember that the realization of security and blessing for the Jews, of protection and provision, of good leadership instead of bad, will not come through the restoration of a geo-political kingdom, that is established by the forceful displacement and dispossession of the Palestinians.

Certainly, we as Christians ought also fervently to hope and pray and work for a more equitable system of government, where the poor and neglected are cared for and are no longer at the mercy of unscrupulous magnates and MPs. But again, at the same time, we need to remember that the kingdom of God is not simply a matter of kinder government and fairer economics.

On the contrary, the Kingdom of God's rule, the place where the sheep are shepherded with kindness and love is, as we read in Hebrews, 'outside the camp'. What does that mean? Simply this: that God's kingdom of justice, equity and righteousness cannot be equated with any system of ritual or religious practice, nor can it be equated with even the most perfect economic and political systems that we might devise. In the world of the ancient Hebrews, to be 'outside the camp' was to be unholy, defiled, and impure. And yet it was precisely there that Jesus died. Golgotha, where he was crucified, was not inside the walls of Jerusalem, but outside of them. It was by dying in that very place of abandonment and scorn, of defilement and injustice, that Jesus established the kingdom of peace and blessing prophesied by Ezekiel. This is the great reversal, that does not simply invert the patterns of exploitative power and abusive government, but that completely shatters their presuppositions.

Blessing and equity, justice and peace, are not gifts given by the powerful to the powerless, but are gifts that are found when we give up what we have to be in solidarity with those who have nothing. The peaceful kingdom of righteous rule spoken about so long ago by Ezekiel was founded by Jesus in the dirt and desolation of Golgotha, and is found anew every day by us, as we also go to him who is outside the camp, as we go to be where the face of Jesus can still be seen – in the poor and the persecuted, the homeless and the refugee, the dispossessed and the disliked. Whenever we are humble enough to leave our own privilege and go to those places and people who are outside the camp – who are, as we might say these days, 'beyond the pale' – then we take our part in establishing and building the peaceful kingdom of Ezekiel 34.

May we never think such a calling to be beneath us.

Amen.