

## Second Sunday of Advent. 10 December, 2017. Psalm 85:10. God's vision.

The Bible is full of beautiful images. John the Baptist in his camel's hair clothes held together with a leather belt munching on locusts and wild honey while sitting in a dusty desert ... . That image is probably only on the beautiful list for hippies and others who enjoy an idealised bucolic approach to life. To me it sounds a bit messy, itchy, uncomfortable and a diet perhaps only barely nutritious.

Yet there is a stark beauty here when we see the lengths to which John was prepared to go to serve and to get God's message across. He wasn't looking to be comfortable, or liked, just faithful. And there is beauty and inspiration in that.

There are passages which describe beautiful scenes and places and people in the Bible. And there are also some beautiful descriptions which are more inspirational ideas than tangible realities being depicted.

For example, in our Psalm today we read "Mercy and truth are met together: righteousness and peace have kissed each other." (Psalm 85:10) There is beauty in that. Mercy and truth meeting. Righteousness and peace kissing. That sounds nice. It sounds almost like a reconciliation, a fresh start. The kiss of peace (which is the astonishing act behind the polite handshakes we share at the 'Greeting of Peace') is a kiss of reconciliation, forgiveness, new beginnings and hope.

These are Advent words, words woven together which draw us forward. Advent words. Mercy, truth, righteousness, peace. These are words which inspire hope. They are waiting and preparing and inspiring words. Words of good news. They are also Advent words because they point to something which is not yet, not yet arrived, not yet achieved. They picture an ideal world and yet one which IS unfolding. Not utopian but achievable.

The four words woven together don't actually naturally sit together all of the time. That is part of the beauty of this image. Like the lion laying down with the lamb or the child playing safely near the hole of a snake (see Isaiah 11). Strong, passionate ideas can sometimes be in conflict.

Mercy here is a translation of '*chesed*' – steadfast love. My favourite Hebrew word. It is a rich and passionate word about complete commitment and undying desire for the other to be all they have been created to be. This love meets truth. The word '*emet*' translated here as 'truth' can also be translated 'faithfulness'. A passionate desire for truth to be seen and found and expressed. At its best '*emet*', truth, is bringing light. But is speaking the truth always the best thing to do? The truth and the whole truth? Sometimes it may cause hurt. Sometimes it may be received as less than loving.

Truth needs to be delivered with mercy, with a care and commitment to compassion, with commitment to the person. Love without a passion for truth can avoid saying the hard things. Truth without love can be harsh. Here these two meet. Neither is to be avoided. They need to sit together and find ways to coexist. Pursuing truth. Expressing love. Not avoiding either, or compromising either. This is part of God's vision and God's expression and God's nature.

And alongside love and truth, righteousness and peace have kissed each other. '*Tsedeq*' – righteousness, is not just about being in a right relationship with God. Righteousness is also the call to be right with others, and to be passionate about others and their lives and so it includes a passion for justice. Politicians and the narrowly religious might want us just to focus on our own relationship with God. 'Just stick to religion' the politicians say. And in Australia, in recent years, agencies providing care supported by public funds, like Anglicare, are threatened with having those funds removed if they dare to pursue justice for the oppressed.

But the righteousness to which God calls us is deeply embedded in desire for the world to be whole, for all people to be whole, not only ourselves. Political engagement IS our business, because it is engagement with life. It is this sort of righteousness which is outraged and sickened at the atrocity of our government using children

as pawns for political games, abusing vulnerable people for political advantage. Injustice requires response. As Desmond Tutu said “If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor.”

This righteousness has kissed peace. They embrace and kiss. ‘Shalom’ – peace, is not the absence of war and conflict but the presence of that which brings deep healing. Seeking peace and seeking justice can sometimes be in conflict. Sometimes pursuing justice leads to conflict, disrupting peace, at least in the short term. Civil disobedience can be a beautiful thing. It can also be ugly. Passion for justice also needs to be pursued with commitment to truth and love and the deep desire for healing and peace.

This is a beautiful picture of different hopeful passionate characteristics of engaging with the world intertwining to draw out a deeper way of being, a balance, a harmony which soars. Truth with mercy. Justice with peace.

Notice the verse says “Mercy and truth ARE met together: righteousness and peace HAVE kissed each other.” It sounds like the coming together has already happened. Yet every other verse in this Psalm points to the future. These things will come, justice and truth will be revealed. Peace will be spoken, good will be given.

The psalmist is looking forward to something which has begun and which is still coming. These are aspirational and encouraging images. I often read the outrage that people feel about the incidence of violence in our society: rape and racism and prejudice and persecution. It sometimes seems that the passion for justice in the face of barbarity and the declaration of truth in the face of lies become so overwhelmed by anger that creative responses are stifled. The invitation here for mercy, love and desire for healing to be woven into our words and actions is harder to hear, harder to do, but this is a Godly call for a better future than would be built on fiery passions alone.

Our world and our history as humanity is full of responses which set aside a commitment to love and healing in the pursuit of truth and justice. The good news calls us to a more difficult way. We see that way, lived, embodied and expressed in Jesus.

John the Baptist stood as a herald of this more difficult way. He was pointing to something deeper and richer which was beginning to unfold. He was certainly fiery and very passionate, yet he also cared deeply about those to whom he spoke and he was wanting them to change and grow. The invitation is always to find a fresh start. Not to look back at the ways of being and acting and reacting which may have dragged us down, but to take God’s invitation of a fresh start.

John chose the Jordan River as the place to celebrate baptism, the place for this fresh start. It wasn’t just that this was the only place where water could be found. The Jordan itself has layers of significance deeper than the sediment at the bottom of the river. The Jordan was a place to start again.

The Exodus story is woven deeply into our understanding of Baptism. In the blessing of the water used for baptism we bring to mind the experience of the people of Israel passing through the water. The people passed through the Red Sea and ALSO passed through the River Jordan. The Jordan crossing was after they had wandered in the Sinai desert. It was after they had worked through a lot of the baggage they had brought with them. The crossing of the Jordan was the fresh start. Here, John’s baptism, is starting afresh, going back to the door way and inviting people to step through again, renewed – with the promise of more to come!

This is good news. Embracing the possibility for a new start, a fresh start, lets us discover how we will be, not just how we have been. It is an invitation to put our hands and lives into the hands of the one whose vision for us is wholeness, life, and deeply passionate living. Each Advent, each celebration of baptism, each time we hear again the call to live deeply, that hand of God reaches out again in invitation. And in this vision of God for us and for our deep, passionate, whole living “Mercy and truth are met together: righteousness and peace have kissed each other.” Amen.

**Paul Mitchell**