

The Hope of our Calling Advent 1, 2009

Jeremiah 33:14-16, Psalm 25:1-10, 1 Thess 3:9-13, Luke 21:25-38

On a rocky seacoast where shipwrecks were frequent there was once a ramshackle life-saving station. It was no more than a hut and there was only one boat, but the few people who manned the station were a devoted lot who kept constant watch over the sea, and, with little regard for themselves and their safety, went fearlessly out in a storm if there had been a shipwreck somewhere. Many lives were thus saved and the station became famous.

As the fame of the station grew, so did the desire of people in the neighbourhood to become associated with its excellent work. They generously offered of their time and money so new members were enrolled, new boats bought and new crews trained. The hut was replaced by a comfortable building which could adequately handle the needs of those who had been saved from the sea. Of course, since shipwrecks do not occur every day, so the building became a popular gathering place – a sort of local club. As time passed the members became so engaged in socializing, fundraising and other such activities that they had little interest or energy left for life-saving, although they duly sported the life-saving motto on the badges they wore. As a matter of fact, when some people were actually rescued from the sea, it was a nuisance because they were dirty and sick and soiled the carpeting and furniture.

Soon the social activities of the club became so numerous and the life-saving activities so few that there was a show-down at a club meeting with some members insisting that they return to their original purpose and activity. A vote was taken and these troublemakers, who proved to be a small minority, were invited to leave the club and start another.

Which is precisely what they did – a little further down the coast, with such selflessness and daring that, after a while, their heroism made them famous. Whereupon their membership was enlarged, their hut was reconstructed.....and their idealism smothered. If you happen to visit that area today you will find a number of exclusive clubs dotting the shoreline. Each one of them is justifiably proud of its origin. Shipwrecks still occur in those parts, but nobody seems to care much.

A story (paraphrased) by Anthony de Mello¹

¹ The Prayer of the Frog. Vol 1 p112

There is much to be learned from this story, and it can be retold in many different ways. It is not about one group in particular, but about any group, community or movement that becomes distracted from its primary calling and purpose. It is a story that has much to say about what can happen to Christian communities and religious organisations when their focus and trust in God becomes distracted or reshaped by other things, goals, or influences.

Our readings today draw our attention to the fact that Jesus is coming and therefore, the kingdom of God is near, so we are called to examine where we have put our trust. Have we remained faithful to God? What do we look to for our present and future hope? At the fulfilment of all things, will we hold everlasting treasure in our hands or only chaff to be blown away in the wind?

In our reading from Luke today, we only get the last part of chapter 21, but if we look at the whole chapter we get a sense of Jesus' teaching. It begins with the story about the poor widow offering everything she had to God, compared to those who were wealthy who gave only what they could spare. It continues with some of the disciples commenting on the beauty and majesty of the Temple and Jesus warning them that before long it would all be gone.

Jesus then goes on to warn of hard and frightening times ahead where many would be persecuted, all that is familiar would be taken away and there would be great uncertainty and chaos in the world. This is when the people of God would discover the value and worth of what they had put their trust in – those who have kept their trust and hope in God would be uplifted, strengthened and redeemed; those who have allowed themselves to be distracted by other things would find themselves bereft.

The Jewish establishment of Jesus' time had come to put their faith and hope in religious symbols and systems of law which had become an end in themselves. Such things had become invested with a power and importance beyond their due, and thus the primary calling of God's people had become distorted and domesticated to the point of almost being lost altogether. Jesus is deeply concerned about this. He is angered by it and challenged the religious authorities about the way in which they had betrayed their covenant with God.

When the Temple becomes more important than nurturing a relationship with God then something has gone horribly wrong. When holiness becomes defined by who is excluded rather than who is welcomed with the hospitality and grace of God, then something essential has been lost. The people of God have not remained faithful to their calling, and the whole earth is suffering.

In Luke's gospel Jesus is concerned with healing, hospitality, wholeness, relationship and abundant life. He pays particular attention to those who are excluded, to the poor, to God's response of grace to the sinner. Unfortunately these are not the things we see reflected in the religious establishment and leadership of the day.

We too, know how easy it is to become distracted by the things that seem important, but ultimately don't matter. In our personal lives we can allow petty squabbles to gain much more power than they deserve, we can allow money or the need for success and recognition to become the driving force of our way of life; and we often realise, with regret, that we have neglected our relationship with God because we have focused our attention elsewhere.

In our communities of faith these things can happen too. In some parishes something as innocent as the flower roster can become a hot bed of political infighting that would make the Liberal party this week look like a kindergarten class.

Some faith communities become absorbed by building projects or special programs that become the measure of success or failure. For others the worship experience each week is more akin to an exclusive performance by the gifted and talented rather than a humble, reverent, inclusive community offering.

The things, the symbols and the structures we gather, create and build around us are usually helpful, meaningful and have their purpose in nourishing our faith, our community life and our mission in the world; however, they are aids and resources only. Christ alone is the source of our strength, identity, joy and life. It is so easy to find ourselves expending energy and resources upon things that look worthwhile or begin as a good idea, but in the end serve to take us in a different direction to our original purpose.

The message of our readings today is that if our hope is planted firmly in Christ, then we need not fear the troubles, the challenges, the storms we encounter on our journey of faith. If our faith and hope are in Christ then everything familiar could be taken away from us and we would still know who we are and that God has a purpose for us.

We may not know what the future holds, but we do know that the future rests secure in Christ. Our calling, our vocation as a community of Christ is to go into the world as a sign of hope, to be agents of light and life. If there is something preventing us from doing this, whether it be fear, enslavement to a particular way

of doing things, or something else that is distracting us from serving Christ, then it needs to be examined, and redeemed.

May this holy vocation that we have been given, be the basis of our meditations and prayers this Advent season as we consider our primary calling and purpose in this local area. Are there burdens we need to set down, are there new possibilities we need to embrace, are there aspects of our life together that we are being called to re-imagine in the light of the Kingdom of God? Jesus is coming, the kingdom of God is near.

May Christ bless us as travel the journey together.

The Lord be with you.