

Westgate Baptist Community
10 December 2006
A Sermon by Geoff Wraight

Living faithfully between the now and not yet.

Luke 1:78-9

By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

Yesterday morning the phone rang at 7:30am. It was Wendy Valentine with the news that her mum Lena Stone had passed away in the early hours of the morning. I drove around to sit for a while with Max and other members of the family. There are never any words that are adequate in those situations and often just being present together with family and friends is all that is needed. I prayed with the family then left to attend to other things.

One of those things was a quick trip to the Victoria Market to pick up some fresh fruit and veggies. As I headed out on the road I was suddenly struck by the depth of the smoke haze and the orange filtered light that was beginning to show as the sun rose.

As I headed up onto the Westgate Bridge the seriousness of the smoke haze revealed itself more fully. There was no denying that the extent of the bush fires in the state's north-east was huge. The visibility from the top of the bridge was probably only 500m in all directions. You couldn't see where you had come from and you certainly couldn't see where the bridge ended. It was a strange and eerie feeling. The acrid smell irritated the back of my throat and began to cause my eyes to water.

It reminded me of that experience of fresh pain and loss that I had just come from. In moments of great loss it is very hard to focus on the past or the future. Everything can feel like it is closing in around you and it is hard to see where you have come from or where you are going. It is hard to live in the present when the past and the future are so clouded. We need to get our bearings, we need memory and hope to live effectively.

Of course we can focus too much on the past which we know to be unhealthy. To say that someone is "living in the past" means that they have failed to take account of the way things have changed. They respond to life and the people around them on the basis of an outdated view of things. They are suspicious of new ideas and new ways of doing things - "we've never done it that way before! - so it probably won't work.."

Zechariah was the father of John the Baptizer and the one whose words of blessing to his newborn child we read this morning. In fact, in the story, these are the first words he has uttered in months. He had become mute after his disbelief at the angel Gabriel's word that a child would be born to his wife Elizabeth in their old age. That's just ridiculous he laughed - it just doesn't happen that way.

But of course, we followers of Jesus spend a lot of time retelling and reenacting the stories of the past. We gather here week by week and listen to stories from ancient times. We share communion "to remember him," calling the events of the past to consciousness and praying that we might become part of that story of death and resurrection and re-creation. It may not be quite true to say we are living in the past, but it is certainly true to say that we are endeavoring to allow the past to shape our present experience.

But Zechariah's words actually point to the future. They describe a vision of the coming reign of

God that will be announced and prepared by his son John. John will call the people to focus on a future reality that he describes like this,

By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

Now it is also true that too much focus on the future can be unhealthy. People who put their whole lives on hold in the belief that they are about to win tattslotto and that everything that matters will arise out of that,

or people who are so fixated on some dream of future — when I'm married, or when the kids leave home, or when I build my boat — that they neglect to do the hard work of actually making life and love work in the here and now.

And by the way, we need to be careful when we sometimes speak to our young people in terms of “you are the future church”. They are not the future church, they are very much the church present, their life and participation and vision and energy is real and concrete and part of who we are now — and it is often the affirmation and acknowledgment of this that can make the difference in a young person's understanding of their part in Christian community.

So yes, as Christians we are called to live with the past faithfulness of God and the future vision of the kingdom as the bearings of our journey. But we live in the present and in our story of Zechariah's vision of God's purposes for John, we see this actually being fulfilled in our second reading out of Chapter 3 of Luke.

These verses about the beginning of John's prophetic ministry are every public Bible reader's worst nightmare.

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis (sounds like some bad throat infection), and Lysanias ruler of Abilene,

3:2 during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

Whew!

What on earth has all this got to do with anything? Well let's give it a little more contemporary rendering..

In the fifth year of the presidency of George W Bush, when Tony Blair was still Prime Minister of Great Britain, and John Howard was in his last year as Prime Minister of Australia because Kevin Rudd had just become the new opposition Leader — not too long after Steve Bracks had been re-elected the Premier of Victoria.

And while Pope Benedict the sixteenth had the ears of all the local Australian Catholic Bishops and church leaders, the word of God came to John the Backpacker, who was staying in the Half-Moon Caravan Park in Braybrook.

Clearly the writer wants to impress on us that we are dealing with a real place, a real time, and with real people and real events. The great mysteries of God's past and future are about the shaping of the present. They are about changing the way we live in the here and now. They are about the things of God taking shape in the nitty-gritty realities of our lives in real time.

So into the midst of the politics of the day and the concerns of ordinary individual lives, John comes preaching and baptising and calling us embrace a new vision of the future, a vision in which the future is held in the hands of God and will be shaped in the image of God's love and justice.

This was not a new message. In summarizing his message, the gospel writers recall the words of the prophet Isaiah from several hundred years earlier, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley will be filled and every mountain made low and the crooked ways will be made straight and the rough ways made smooth, and everyone on earth will see the salvation of God."

There is a curious double focus to this message. On the one hand, Isaiah and John are speaking about the future and saying that the time is coming when God will do these things, when God will straighten things out and set things right and level out the inequalities. But on the other hand they are telling **us** to get stuck into it, to prepare the way of the Lord and make the paths straight **ourselves**.

You see John is telling us to prepare the way. He is saying that we don't have to just wait in fear for the future or in longing for the past. We can begin to live in that reality now and begin the work of reshaping our lives and our world according to that reality.

In this Advent season, as we stand on tiptoes and strain to see the coming kingdom as its approach lights up our horizon, we do so as a people who have already been baptised into the life of that kingdom. People who live in the present and are able to be present to each other and in community in a radical way. In a way the is more real and engaged, more open and compassionate, more generous and hopeful than much of the world around us.

The view from the bridge is changing. The Advent season is like a fresh breeze lifting off the clean ocean and blowing the smoke haze away – revealing the clear sky, showing the road we have traveled and revealing the road ahead. Clarity of vision returns and a wonderful perspective opens up revealing the city as a part of a much bigger place..

The season of Advent and its various mouthpieces — Malachi, Isaiah, and John — are all telling us that darkness we may be experience now is not the sum total of reality. There is a future vision that is clear and is already happening. The reign of God is at hand. God has begun to rule among us. The transforming of our lives and the birth of hope is happening now. The air is clearing, the gloomy smoke is blowing away.

The sign of the coming of John the Baptizer is a call to live with a new perspective on the world shaped by our faith in God the starter and finisher of the vision of peace.

This Advent hope is not just wishful thinking, it is not an empty escapist hope, it is not "a pie in the sky when you die" hope which retreats from reality. It is a hope full of substance. It works with the raw material of the here and now, but it is not content to let it be. There is always a vision of what yet might be.

Always an expectation of finding God in unexpected places - usually among the poor and certainly among the humble..

..always hoping, always expecting, always working for peace even in the face of apparent darkness – and finding it even in the birth of a helpless child into poverty and hardship in the backblocks of Palestine 2000 years ago.

To use the prophet's words as a prayer..

"O God, may your tender and patient love
dawn on us and light up the world for us.
Even in the darkest hours, in the blackest hell-holes of our world,
may your love break through and illuminate the way of peace."

Amen.