

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 28 Year C 2022

Even a somewhat casual reading of the holy gospels reveals the importance of 'place' for the evangelists. This prominence of 'place' simply reflects an essential truth of the Christian faith: that the Incarnate Son of God is born at a particular time, amongst a particular people, and in a particular place. Through the gospels, we can trace the footsteps of Our Lord. Geography, place names, distances, towns and cities and landmarks are all features of the gospels. And oftentimes, they are not just mentioned in a matter-of-fact way, as if the gospels were not much more than a travel journal. No. Oftentimes places are charged with theological or spiritual significance.

In the gospel portion today is found such a geographical note. In some ways Jesus finds himself in a 'no-place'. But that here *is* the important point. We are told Our Lord finds himself 'in the midst of Galilee and Samaria'. In other translations 'between' Galilee and Samaria, or the 'border' between Galilee and Samaria. It is a kind of 'no man's land'. And for good reason. This is where the lepers - the focus of today's gospel story - have gathered. We might suppose they have been excluded by both their peoples - Galileans and Samaritans - and so find themselves in this sort of neutral, in-between region. Their shared ailments allowing them - Jew and Samaritan - to overcome their usual hostilities. But even if they have carved out for themselves their own place they are very much on the edge, the fringes. And not by choice.

Being pushed to boundaries, being excluded, being separated from the life of the mainstream community is a terrible experience for anyone. This past week Christians in Australia got a rude shock about what this looks like for us. The forced removal of Andrew Thorburn as chief executive of the Essendon Football Club, after less than a day in office because of his involvement in the church City on Hill, should leave all earnest believers more than a little unsettled. This case has led the commentariat and cultural elite of this country to shout out 'unclean, unclean!' It reveals their clear intent to push Christians to the margins and remove them - let's be clear: remove us - from public life. My dear people, make no mistake what this issue signals to faithful believers in this country. To be a believer connected to an orthodox, traditional church of one form or another makes you unacceptable in our culture.

Now, this country is in more trouble than we probably care to admit if football clubs are supposed to be upholders and enforcers of so-called 'community values.' But to show how mean-spirited and desperate the pursuers of this issue have been, they had

to trawl back to a sermon from 2013 – nearly a decade ago! - to find the offending references. What has seen Mr Thorburn expelled was merely his association with his church, where he is board chair. He did not publicly espouse the so-called ‘controversial views’, and there was no evidence that he would have sought to have had these views influence his role as club executive. The situation would be like holding Jeremy and Donald and Cass – our church wardens – accountable *in their work places* for what was said here ten years ago! What a strange, peculiar and dangerous new world we have entered into....

We should know City on a Hill is an Authorized Anglican Congregation. To be sure considerably different in style and content to what we are familiar with here. But Anglican nonetheless. They hold to views such as the inviolable sanctity of human life from conception to natural death and to what we might call a classical understanding of marriage and human sexuality. I have no illusions that these views are held by a minority in our society, and that even in this congregation there will be differences of opinion. But it should come as no surprise to anyone that these views *are part* of the Christian heritage and continue to be so for many. It is disingenuous or just plain ignorance to dismiss traditional beliefs as simply ‘divisive’, or ‘controversial’.

In a statement issued Tuesday evening, Mr Thorburn expressed it quite clearly. *‘Despite my own leadership record, within hours of my appointment being announced, the media and leaders of our community had spoken. They made it clear that my Christian faith and my association with a Church are unacceptable in our culture if you wish to hold a leadership position in society’.* He went on. *‘People should be able to hold different views on complex personal and moral matters, and be able to live and work together, even with those differences, and always with respect.’*

The Premier weighed in declaring the beliefs expressed in the 2013 sermon – and so the beliefs of countless orthodox believers - as ‘absolutely appalling.’ His words! He said, *‘I don’t support those views, that kind of intolerance, that kind of hatred, bigotry.’* Well. I call his bluff. I charge the Premier’s accusations against Christians as something he himself guilty of: intolerance and bigotry. He accuses Mr Thorburn of these things but in so doing charges many of *you* sitting before me now.

The incident that has unfolded this past week highlights a few lessons all Christians should heed.

Firstly, we should note that we are no longer a society committed to genuine pluralism. Issues like the one Essendon and Thorburn have faced show that for all our declared love of an open, diverse society, Australia is no longer genuinely pluralistic. The number of caveats around what that means in the public square is large and increasing. This incident will be looked back upon as a drawing of a line in the sand.

Next, we shouldn't expect a level playing field. There's a naive optimism that somehow if we just keep to our patch as Christians, and maintain the line between public and private, that we will be okay; that if we honour this new secular frame, and pay homage to it, we will be free to get on with our own set of values within our own ethical communities. Wrong. This is already clear from how Christian schools are being squeezed, and clear in how state governments - such as in Victoria - are already pushing hard to ensure schools *cannot* employ according to their own standards. This is not about funding. If Christian schools were fully self-funded, accreditation would be on the table.

But most Aussies either don't agree with us or don't care. Don't expect a line of horrified non-believers to be behind us on this. Most probably want us to have our freedoms, but at the same time agree with Mr Andrews when he says those ideas are hatred and bigotry. And we shouldn't expect a fair hearing. We end up like rabbits in the headlights trying to argue a case that no one believes, and most people in the media not only see as wrong, but as harmful. In other words, we are seen as the bad guys.

Further, being winsome is a faithful stance, but a failed strategy. Many of us have sought to be winsome as Christians (in line with 1 Peter 3), because it's the right thing to do and it reflects the attitude of Jesus in the face of those who persecuted him. But don't expect winsome to win the day. It's a failed strategy that will not keep at bay those who wish to bring us down. Be winsome for principled reasons, not pragmatic ones. If you're only being winsome because you think it works, you will get angry or feel despair when it doesn't work.

Finally, we ought to remain convinced that every situation is an opportunity to witness to Jesus. The response by Andrew Thorburn online was excellent. And it was humble. It did not seek to blame others. It revealed the depth of his integrity and his faith modelled on Jesus himself. We can but hope and pray that such attitudes will point toward a different ethic, a different way of being in the world; point to a different way.

It is not easy or pleasant to find ourselves on the edges, where the playing field is uneven and the dominant forces of the culture are set against us. Remember, then, that in the gospel text placed before us today Jesus *goes out* to the marginal place. There is no place beyond Jesus' presence. It is precisely on the fringes, the boundaries, the places of exclusion that the Lord Christ can be encountered. We must learn to seek him there and allow him to visit us there. The truth of the gospel is that Jesus heals us and makes us whole. However painful and difficult it is to realize, the culture about us certainly *doesn't* make us whole. We find ourselves in new, marginal territory. Let us be sure, then, that our one hope – and the source of our gratitude – be Jesus alone. Amen.