

**“Nourishing a resilient faith” a sermon based on Ephesians 1:3-14 and Mark 6:14-29 preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Kerry Enright on the occasion of a profession of faith by one of the young people of Knox Church.**

That may have been the most depressing gospel reading to accompany a profession of faith ... the beheading of John the Baptist. Surely I should have put aside the set gospel for today and chosen a reading more uplifting.

Instead we get a reading that contains not one piece of good news, not one note of hope, not one sign that things will work out ok in the end.

It's a story about a faithless king who forsakes his wife to marry his brother's wife. A prophet condemns the marriage, the new wife seethes and the king imprisons the prophet. The king throws himself a birthday party and invites his daughter to dance for his guests. The dance is so pleasing that he promises her anything she desires. The daughter demands the prophet's head. And so John the Baptist is beheaded and his head is delivered to the daughter on a platter.

If only these events were long in the past! How sadly familiar they sound.

- A leader leaving his wife to form an inappropriate relationship.
- The imprisoning and killing and beheading of a truth-teller.
- A person getting revenge by influencing a susceptible family member.
- A raucous party that gets out of hand.
- Stupid promises that have to be kept to maintain face.
- A heart-breaking and senseless death.

One writer put it:

What bothers me about John the Baptist's death — its gruesomeness notwithstanding — is its utter senselessness. John dies at the whim of a clueless teenager. He dies because a powerful woman has a callous heart and a lustful man has a shallow sense of honour. He dies for moral cowardice. He dies for a dance.

The Reverend Ian Dixon was Assistant Minister here and before that a chaplain in the Army during World War Two. At the end of the war he was part of the New Zealand contingent that occupied Japan. He saw Hiroshima within a month of the atomic bomb being dropped. This is what he said:

“Our troopship came into port and after a few hours we were put on a train. The first place where it stopped was Hiroshima. It stopped for a long time. That is when the bottom of the world just dropped out for me. It influenced those I was with so much that I remember we couldn't talk about it. I saw shadows on the ground, but I didn't realise until long afterwards that they were the shadows left by people who simply dissolved. When we got back on to the train it seems to me now that we went for miles and miles and miles and just looked at blackened scenery. The sight of Hiroshima was the most horrifying experience that I have ever had in my life - an experience that I have never got over.”

Some events don't make sense.

Sometimes events are irredeemably tragic.

Sometimes we can only be quiet.

Full-stop.

The letter to the church at Ephesus seems such a contrast.

Image after image after image of purpose and identity.

The writer describes the community of Christ as:

- Blessed with every spiritual blessing
- Chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless in love
- Destined for adoption as God's children
- Redeemed through the death of Christ
- Forgiven by God's overflowing love
- Knowing the mystery of God's will to gather up all things into God
- Beneficiaries of hope to live for the praise of God
- Sealed by the promised Holy Spirit
- Blessed from heavenly places.

It's like being looking from the top of Mount Aoraki, the highest mountain, with the broadest perspective, the Tasman on one side, the Pacific on the other, seeing the rib of mountains and valleys, the stretching plains and braiding rivers, the tussock and the grass, the tidy hedges and neat fences and untidy forests. A spacious view that looks across all life.

The writer peers across time, to speak of a time before the foundation of the world, of past and future beyond our recording, of destiny and divine plan beyond our sight.

It's a perspective that seeks to reach back before time and forward beyond anticipation. Eternal.

A Central Otago view with a broad sky and wide horizon. The Ephesians God is a Central Otago God.

Two perspectives – a senseless event; a purposeful destiny.

What do we do with these two perspectives?

Our faith does not smooth over jagged edges or meaningless experiences or pointless horrors.

And

Our faith says that in Christ our lives are part of a deep purpose and a long destiny.

Which of course amplifies the senselessness of senseless events.

What do we do?

The Quaker philosopher Elton Trueblood said, "Occasionally we talk of our Christianity as something that solves problems, and there is a sense in which it does. Long before it does so, however, it increases both the number and the intensity of the problems."

We live in both worlds of the beheading of a prophet and the deep purpose of life.

We live in the untidiness of that.

Because although we can systematise faith, it is not a jigsaw puzzle in which the different pieces fit neatly together within a square frame.

Faith is faith, not certainty.

Jesus experienced that untidiness.

According to Matthew's Gospel, when Jesus heard of John's death, "he left in a boat to a remote area to be alone."

He didn't preach or explain.

He didn't turn the horror into a morality tale.

He didn't minimize the murder.

He withdrew into silence.

He made space for the senselessness.

And then? Then he fed people.

The feeding of the five thousand directly follows John's death.

Jesus came back from the violent senselessness, asked a crowd to sit down, gathered whatever bread and fish he could find, and fed people.

Vanessa, you are professing your faith, and we will be with you.

I pray for you a faith in Christ that feels deeply the senselessness of much that happens in our world and does not try to smooth it over.

I pray for you a raw faith in Christ with jagged edges, a curious faith that keeps growing into the spaciousness of a Central Otago God.

And more. Ian Dixon said that in the face of Hiroshima, he lost his faith for a year and had to borrow that of others.

I pray for you a faith community to help you grow in faith, that deepens your hunger and thirst for God, for living with God, for God's world, as you live out who you are in Christ.

You know that at times the church itself is senseless and we can only be quiet.

But this old cracked pot contains a treasure, the story of the life of God.

That story includes you Vanessa, you who are sealed in love with God's Spirit.

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