

Sermon – Proper 10 - Christ Church Oyster Bay

Mark: 6:14-29

I am going to make a broad assumption that most of you don't know much about me. Now that you've heard my voice you might gather that I am Australian. People often talk of Australia as a young country. They would be right if they were referring to the time since European settlement started in 1788. However, the Australian Aborigines trace their heritage back some 60,000 years and are regarded as the oldest continuing culture in the world. So in fact Australia is one of the oldest inhabited countries in the world.

A key part of the Aboriginal culture is the Dreamtime, a mythology grounded in the creation of their country and their revered ancestral figures. They believe that it is through these ancestors that worldly knowledge is accumulated. These figures are not worshipped as gods, rather revered for the knowledge they pass down. The sacred stories are transmitted from generation to generation. It is this history that grounds their lives and gives them meaning.

For Aboriginal Christians the relatively short arc of Judeo-Christian history and its revelation of God has to be interpreted along with their ancient mythology. Mythology and theology is the prism through which they view the world.

As European Christians we don't have that deeply grounded mythology. We are post-enlightenment people. We draw our life's meaning and symbols from a predominantly Judeo-Christian heritage. We can trace that heritage back a mere three or so millennia, a far less time than most indigenous cultures have existed. However, just like indigenous people we look to our history for meaning and symbols. In our case as Christians, we look for how God and Jesus are revealed to us, both in the scriptures and in the world around us.

The bible reveals God but was never intended to be a historical document or a text book, as some would believe it is. The key purpose of the canon of scripture we call the Bible is to tell of God's revelation of Gods-self to the world and the ultimate salvation of the world through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The key to understanding the bible lies in the correct interpretation.

One aspect of interpretation is the theological concept of Typology. Typology as it relates to theology is where a historical biblical event is seen as an anticipation of some aspect of the coming of Jesus Christ.

The great patristic scholar Augustine pondered the concept of typology and "how the language, signs and symbols of a fallen world can point to God."¹ He talked about needing "divine illumination" to truly get at the correct meaning. For us it is the Holy Spirit that works in us to help us understand the scriptures. For ancient cultures it was the custodians of the sacred stories that illumined them.

¹ McGrath Alister E, *Christian Theology. An Introduction 5th Ed.* Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester 2011 p131

Augustine said of the Bible that, “the New Testament is hidden in the Old; and the Old is made accessible by the New.”² For Augustine, typology manifested itself partly through God’s gracious self-revelation and partly through the incarnation.

So typology consists of a ‘type,’ the historical story or figure, and the ‘anti-type’ the manifestation of the type in Jesus life. Typology is like a roadmap or a series of markers laid down so we can find our way. A couple of examples:

Jonah was swallowed by the great fish and was in its belly for three days before he was regurgitated on the beach. Typology would say that this prefigured Christ’s death and entombment, before his resurrection to new life.

Another example is the type of Abraham and Isaac. Abraham felt called by God to sacrifice his son for the world. As he was preparing to kill him an angel of the Lord intervened and provided a ram as an alternate sacrifice. Isaac’s life was spared. The anti-type is God’s willingness to allow his one and only Son, the Lamb of God to be sacrificed at the hands of the religious authorities. Like Isaac, Jesus was spared external death and raised to new life. There are many other examples to be found in scripture.

Typology though does not have to be limited to Old Testament stories prefiguring a story found in the New Testament. Today’s gospel reading can be interpreted as a typology. The death of John the Baptist is the prefiguration of Jesus own death. John the Baptist is the last in a line of great biblical prophets that were commissioned by God to reveal Gods-self to the world.

The very nature of the prophetic voice crying out in the wilderness made them a target of the authorities and the ruling classes. No one in power likes to be reminded that they are being unjust or criminal in their acts. A noisy and annoying prophet who voices God’s call for love and justice was definitely not welcomed. Today is not that much different.

The lives and deaths of John and Jesus are remarkably similar. John had told Herod that his marriage to Herodias, his brother wife was illegal. Herodias was angry at this criticism and even though Herod wanted to protect John, Herodias manipulated her daughter to dance for him and the crowd, and then asked for a favor as a reward. When she asked for the head of John, Herod was upset but to avoid looking weak to the crowd and his family he ordered John’s execution.

Similarly, Jesus antagonized the religious authorities that went out of their way to trap him and bring him up on false charges. They eventually succeeded and brought him before Pilate. They argued it was better for one man to die than for many. We all know that Pilate found that Jesus had no case to answer but like Herod was a coward and was not willing to look weak and so offered to crucify Jesus as a tonic to calm the crowd.

When we find ourselves in the midst of crowds either physically or metaphorically that are calling for a victim to be identified we have to stop and think if we are falling for the same temptation that impacted the crowds before Herod and Pilate. Are we a willing participant?

² ibid p132

Rene Girard, a French anthropologist has written extensively on this identifiable cycle of human violence. He calls this the mimetic cycle. Mimetic means the mirroring of someone else's desire. He writes "A proliferation of scandals leads sooner or later into an acute crisis at the climax of which unanimous violence is set off against a single victim, the victim finally selected by the entire community. This event re-establishes the former order or establishes a new one out of the old. Then the new order itself is destined someday to enter into a crisis, and so on."³

John's prophetic voice was silenced, like so many of the prophetic voices that preceded him. In their lives and in their deaths God was revealing to the world the outcome for his only Son. Similarly Jesus was not to be spared this vicious and violent human action and became a victim of the baying crowd.

Girard summarizes what the prophet John probably intended to say, "Once more we find ourselves in a great crisis, and it will end with the collective execution of the new envoy of God: Jesus. Yahweh will use his violent death as the occasion of a new and supreme revelation."⁴ The resurrection of Jesus was that revelation, the defeat of death and the promise of a new life free of the violence humans perpetuate amongst themselves.

The pattern of the mimetic cycle continues to play out in our world today. We don't have to look much further than what is happening in our country with the debate about immigration and refugees. The refugees tend to be seen as the scapegoat and we are seeing more and more violent acts perpetrated against them.

As Christians, God calls us to be the anti-types of the prophets and of Jesus. They are types, the figures that inform and inspire us to promote God's message of love, justice and righteous living to a fallen world.

We need to be prophetic voices in the mold of Amos. He was commissioned by God to stand up in his community. He was called to be a "plumb line," a naturally straight and upright individual in the midst of a corrupt community. His message threatened the authorities that wanted nothing more than for him to leave them alone.

We, like Amos are chosen, destined, given insight into the mystery of God's will, are included in God's inheritance and are marked and sealed as God's own. We are just like the Ephesians Paul speaks of and just like the key prophets. We are called to be "plumb lines" in the midst of our communities.

We look back in our history to see the revelation of God and we look forward in hope to the New Jerusalem. We have to be prepared to take up our cross to follow Jesus. The risk is high but the reward is sweet.

Amen

³ Girard, Rene *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* Orbis Books, NY 1999 p30

⁴ Ibid p31