



Trinity 17

THE NEW SHOFAR

The Kingdom of God is animated through the Cross

Hosea 4:1-6 - Mark 9:30-37

Why are the ways of God so mysterious!

Sometimes – perhaps even often – God seems to ask too much of those called to be followers of the Way of Jesus. We do not always like what God wants and feel what is being expected of us is far too difficult, at times even impossible for us to maintain. Then there are the other times – again, perhaps all too often - when what God demands of disciples makes no sense at all. When it is looked at in terms of common sense, politics, science, political correctness, financial prudence and the experience of human history, it seems as though God’s message has been misunderstood. Perhaps it needs to be taken out of its ancient Jewish and Roman cultural setting and translated so that it fits into our modern culture.

This is the very problem faced by the disciples in today’s Gospel. Nowhere in their wildest imaginations did the coming of the Messiah of God translate as his going to his death on a cross. How could it be the will of God for the Messiah to be handed over to the enemies of God? What could possibly come from such a dark and unimaginable act? They had much better ideas, more practical solutions and less offensive ways of bringing the Kingdom of God alive on earth. Better not to rock the boat of the Roman Empire!

God’s people are expected to live as God’s people!

It is worthwhile pausing to ponder Hosea’s contribution to our understanding of discipleship. Chapter four takes readers into a court hearing where God is summoning the people of Israel to hear complaints being made against them. According to the divine charges there are three serious elements lacking in their covenant relationship with Yahweh: *faithfulness, steadfast love and the knowledge of God*. As God continues, the five significant (symbolic) consequences of this kind of unfaithfulness becomes apparent across the wider community – *swearing, lying, murder, stealing and adultery*. This is described by the prophet as *anarchy*, with one bloody deed following another. It all comes about because there is no knowledge of God in the land (4:1). Take God out of the human equation and there is nothing to control the growth and spread of sin. While Hosea lays much of the blame for this on the shoulders of the priests – they are more interested in the self than on the needs of God’s people, concerned more about performance than substance – Israel herself cannot avoid her fate.

The reality of a conditional faith

The difference in understanding in our Gospel is clear: Jesus is serving the Father and the disciples are working for the fulfilling of their own hopes and expectations. When Jesus says that it is absolutely certain the Messiah is to go to his death and die, they do not like it and struggle to resist it. They are men of faith, but their faith is conditional – conditional on God going along the pathway with which

Produced by Bishop Michael Hough for the Disciples of Christ -

anathoth.hough@gmail.com - www.houghgod.com

they are comfortable. God should not be going against that which men and women are prepared to tolerate, that which they understand and accept. There are, after all, other “gods” that might better satisfy their desires and expectations, “gods” that demand less and promise more.

For Jesus the Way of the Father permeating his teaching and actions is a *Way of the Cross*. For the disciples, the Way of the Father must be a *disciple friendly way* if they are to take it. As Mark notes *they did not understand* and this is their difficulty. Because they do *not understand* they are not prepared to take the risk. This was not the way of the father of the sick boy in the previous exorcism. He too did not understand but he had enough of an insight into the reality of who Jesus was and what Jesus was doing to persevere in his limited faith and understanding. He prayed *Lord, increase my faith* rather than cutting himself off from the difficulties associated with discipleship.

Let them eat grass!

During the week I was appalled to see images of families in Yemen picking leaves, grinding them up and feeding them to their children in a kind of green paste. It is the only thing they have available for food. They are men, women and children no different to the men, women and children Jesus encountered in his ministry in Judea; no different to our own families and friends but they suffer and die because of the politics of evil that has overtaken the world. That night, what was the issue dominating our news? Are women being bullied in parliament! It did make me wonder about that reading from Hosea and whether or not, like Israel before us, we too have lost a genuine sense of *faithfulness, steadfast love and the knowledge of God*.

Yemen is 10,272 kilometres from Australia and so we do not have to walk past these starving families as we make our way to work and to our restaurants. But that does not free us from guilt and alongside Israel we stand today before the divine court and are being asked: *Why?* In a world dumping millions of tons of good food each day, a nation where eating well and eating often is taken for granted, why do the followers of Jesus remain blind, deaf and silent?

Diminish God and evil fills the vacuum

Of course, the standard response is “What can I do about Yemen?”. But the standard response is not acceptable in the place of the Gospel response. It is the failure of Christians to live, proclaim and give witness to the Way of the Kingdom of God that has allowed indifference and sin to shape our nation. The **me** of the modern Western world has replaced the **us** of the Gospel. We do not take the Gospel out into the world because we do not want to be labelled *bible bashers*. We do not challenge moral values opposite to those that form the cornerstone of our Christian traditions. We are silent when the world craves a voice of certainty, absent when others promote views that destructive of the Ways of the Kingdom and accept that one person’s views are as good as another person’s views. We keep religion out of politics, out of the market place, away from our schools and are prepared to believe one religion is the same as another. While we tear others apart within our own faith communities and fail to give our utmost for the mission of the Church, we create cracks and fissures in the social fabric in which indifference, selfishness and a real hardness of heart make a home. This is why we can sit back and watch starving children suck on a paste made of crushed leaves, feel a genuine sorrow and put it down to sectarian squabbles in Islam. We move on. They die. We *now* stand in God’s court and are called upon to defend ourselves as followers of God’s Son. In Mark’s Gospel we are offered the possibility of repentance, the opportunity to begin again in faithfulness. In a world where Christ is alive and at work within his disciples and their faith communities, no one would be eating grass.

Produced by Bishop Michael Hough for the Disciples of Christ -
anathoth.hough@gmail.com - www.houghongod.com

Produced by Bishop Michael Hough for the Disciples of Christ -
anathoth.hough@gmail.com - www.houghongod.com