

ADVENT 2 9 December 2012

Malachi 3:1-14
Song of Zechariah
Philippians 1:1-11
Luke 3:1-6

In the name of God, for whom we wait. Amen.

We seem to be living in uncertain times. Global politics are fraught. Significant power shifts are under way. The global economy is far from secure and the global financial crisis looks as if it may eclipse the Great Depression of the 1920s and 30s in its depth and length. While our domestic economy is in better shape than that of much of the world, the domestic political scene seems unlikely to encourage new generations of Australians to be inspired by our model of democracy. This does not augur well.

And then we had the news early this week about the continuing growth of CO₂ emissions and the likely effect on climate change. This news was not unexpected but it was, nonetheless, sobering and unsettling. As I listened to the news coverage and heard the statistics, a confusing cacophony of responses rose up in my mind. What difference can we make when the entire carbon footprint of my life is tiny compared to the carbon emissions from a week's operation of a petrochemical plant in China? How can we affect the future so that the next generation and the ones after it will be able to continue to live comfortably on this earth? Is there enough political will anywhere to address these issues?

There are, of course, those who, on the basis of the Mayan calendar, are predicting a major cataclysm on 21 December this year. Let me reassure any who may be even slightly concerned that, far from being the end of everything, it is simply the start of a new cycle. Sandra Noble, an expert in the field, tells us "for the ancient Maya, it was a huge celebration to make it to the end of a whole cycle". She is quoted as believing that the portrayal of December 2012 as a doomsday or cosmic-shift event is "a complete fabrication and a chance for a lot of people to cash in." Surely not!

Sceptical about Doomsday on 21 December I may be, but there are still solid reasons to be concerned for the future.

Against this backdrop we wait and we prepare ourselves for the celebration of Jesus' birth as one of us. This may seem disconnected from the urgency of the tasks before us and yet it is intimately linked to who we are and what we do. If, to borrow from Mahatma Gandhi, we are to be the change we want to see in the world, then we need to be deeply connected to who we are and to God.

John the Baptist, who features in today's Gospel reading, is a shining example of this. John's powerful ministry paved the way for the even more

powerful and transforming ministry of Jesus. With great integrity and humility, John knew that he was not the Messiah, the anointed one of God, but he was able to recognize Jesus when he came, even though Jesus was an unexpected, subversive, counter-cultural Messiah.

John occupies an extraordinary place. He understood the past and could see and interpret the signs of what was to come. But as he looked to the future, he also saw clearly his task in the present: a task of preparation. John provides a solid bridge between the past and the future. Indeed, it is the past and the future which give the work he is doing its immediacy and its significance.

The example of John the Baptist suggests that we can only truly discern who we are and who God is, if we sit in this in-between place, open to the past, the present and the future. Only because John sat across these three dimensions of time and held them in tension, only because he was open to the ways in which God works, was he able to recognise Jesus as the Christ.

His example calls us to remember the past, to anticipate the future and attend to the present, so that we too might be able to recognise the presence and action of God in the future, and to participate in it.

For participation is not an optional extra – it is a vital part of who we are called to be as disciples of Christ. The 16th century Spanish saint, Teresa of Avila, reminds us that we are central to God's redemptive action in the world:

Christ has no body but yours, she wrote,

No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.
Christ has no body now but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks compassion on this world.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.....

But this time of year can be a busy, fractious time, with many demands on our time and arrangements to be made. It's OK for John the Baptist, you may think, he didn't have 17 people coming for Christmas lunch. It can also be a time of grieving as the death of loved ones or broken relationships contrast painfully with the celebrations happening all around you. It is a physically tiring time and it can be emotionally draining.

The challenge for us, now and throughout the year, is to avoid being swamped by all of this and to enter into the liminal, transformative space of openness to God.

I would like to suggest that we do as John did and just get on with it. He got on with the task in hand, baptizing and teaching. We are called to live as followers of Christ: not to lose heart, not to be seduced into fear and anxiety by any clouds of uncertainty, and to live lives of reconciliation, kindness, constancy and patience.

For we know that God will be in the future, just as John the Baptist knew that the Messiah was coming. The precise details may be hazy, but the final outcome is not. All through Advent the readings remind us that we live with a level of uncertainty – to follow God does not mean traveling with certainty about where God will lead us; rather, following God calls us to be present to the place where we are, for that is the very place where God shows up and lights the path to the future, whatever that future might hold.

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