

“He’s not the messiah, he’s just a very naughty boy.”

A Sermon preached at Knox Church, Christchurch,

on Sunday, 2 July 2017

by The Revd Dr Ken Booth

Readings for the Day:

- Jeremiah 28:5-9
- Matthew 10:40-42

Joe Bennett’s topic a week or so back was the enquiry you can get in the supermarket, “How’s your day been, so far?” Joe had great fun dissecting this idle phrase. We often say things that are little more than space fillers. The exchange at the checkout may well end with, “Thanks”, and “You’re welcome.” Joe could well have given his attention to that phrase. What is welcome? We are very clear that God’s welcome is warm and embracing here. But in the world it can be a bit harder to say, “Welcome” and mean it. One of the phrases in this morning’s Gospel offers a way to explore this word, though probably not as Joe would do it. Jesus says, “Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward.”

Welcoming prophets is not always what we want to do. In the service sheet you will see various pictures of people who may be thought of as prophets. You’ll recognise some of them instantly. There are Donald Trump and Al Gore. Modern prophets? Well, enough people voted for Donald Trump to make him President of the USA, and he brings to that office a vision of the future that appeals to some. And visions of the future are what prophets are about. Al Gore is more to my taste in his “An Inconvenient Truth”. And there you have alternative prophets. Al Gore vs Donald Trump on climate change, its effects, and what actions we should take. With prophets you nearly always have to take sides.

The little cartoon on the left of the page is of Bishop Selwyn in the early 1860s. It comes from the New Plymouth newspaper. The settlers in New Plymouth were angry with Selwyn because he suggested the purchase of Maori land in the area was dishonest and unjust. So there

Selwyn is protecting Maori from the righteous wrath of the settlers who need land to get on with surviving and providing for their families. It looks like they would like to shoot Selwyn, or at for him to get out the way so they can shoot the troublesome Maori.

Or try our Old Testament reading. Judah was under threat from the Babylonians in the 6th century BC. Most of the prophets surveyed the scene and said what people wanted to hear - soothing words and promises that it will be OK and God will protect us and defend us; or, we'll cut deals that allow us to survive. Jeremiah is out of step. The bit before our reading has another prophet, Hananiah, son of Azzur, from Gibeon, saying, "Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon. Within two years I will bring back to this place all the vessels of the Lord's house, which King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon took away from this place and carried to Babylon". And as we read, Jeremiah says, Rubbish. Prophets who talk of peace are offering alternative facts, otherwise known as lies. So, who do you believe? Then or now?

Prophets are not comfortable people to have around. Two other pictures tell stories from our NZ history: Te Whiti of Rongomai whose story of the peaceful pa-site at Parihaka that was trashed by government forces in 1881 to speed up settlement in the area again makes us choose who is the real prophet. Easier perhaps in Jimmy Baxter, poet, or Nelson Mandela.

But what of Jesus himself? In his own day, people had to make hard choices. Is he really the messiah? The film, "The Life of Brian" is an irreverent but hugely enjoyable take on the life and ministry of Jesus. Mary is Jesus' exasperated Mum bothered by what he is getting up to, and she says to those who think he may be the messiah, "He's not the messiah, he's just a very naughty boy." If we had been there, would we have sided with him or with the authorities? Would we have sided with Jesemiah or Hananiah? In our day do we side with Jane Goodall or not? Jesus says to his contemporaries "Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward." But be warned; they threw Jeremiah down a dry well, and they crucified Jesus, and Trump has used his executive powers to overturn almost

anything Barak Obama did and to ignore Al Gore. The reward of the prophet is not necessarily a bowl of cherries. But choose we must. And to help us choose, Jesus offers us a picture of just what might be involved in deciding our choice. "Whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple - truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward."

What might that involve? There was once a boy named Shane. He lived with his mother in Bishopdale. His father was nowhere in sight and his mum dropped him off at Phillipstown School each morning. He was a polite boy but his mum actually didn't like him, and one morning she bundled up his few bits and pieces in a plastic bag and put them and his BMX in the car and dumped him with his father in Woolston. His father started work at 7.00, so Shane had to get himself up, make his own breakfast, make his own lunch and ride to school. That worked and the school were very understanding. On Thursdays, Shane had to take the rent to Harcourts who then had an office just over the road from Knox here. They didn't open till 9.00, and the school were very understanding that Shane would be late every Thursday.

Then one weekend, Shane's dad went on a bit of blinder, got caught driving drunk, lost his licence, and because of his existing list of infringements, lost his car as well. He still needed to get out to work at 7.00 each morning, so he took the only transport available - Shane's BMX. Shane still had to get himself up, make his own breakfast, make his lunch and walk to school. That took about 15 minutes. Manageable; but on Thursdays, Shane still had to deliver the rent to Harcourts before going to school. The cup of water for Shane was the adult stranger who cared enough to meet with him at school for an hour every week. He was just there as a big brother to listen to Shane without judgement or anything except for what Shane wanted. Truly, I tell you, he will not lose his reward.