



Sermon December 11th What will we do with the news?

by Reverend Anne Stewart

Prayer:

For your coming in Christ among us and for your measureless love of us, we thank you God. Amen

Reflection

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

John 1:6-8, 19-28

I wonder what happens in your house around 6pm each night. For most of my childhood we didn't have TV. My father had gone on a conference tour in America in 1968 (I think I have that date right) where he first came into contact with colour TV. He came back determined that we would not have a TV until the technology that enabled colour TV was available in New Zealand. I'm not sure that the deprivation we suffered as a result was all bad really. We were all active outside until dark most summer evenings and in the colder months I developed a love of reading and my three older brothers developed their skills in winding each other up. And sure enough once colour came in and I have memories of Princess Anne's first wedding in 1974 and the Commonwealth games here in Christchurch being around the start of this, we got our first TV. And after that each night at 6pm, actually I have a memory of the Network News being on at 7pm – am I right in that? Anyway when the news came on everything stopped and we all sat glued waiting to see what had happened that day. This routine continued long after Martin and I got together, until the time came when Hana and I couldn't stand it anymore and we put a stop to it. It wasn't so much the news that drove us to take that stand it was having to experience Martin's interaction with the news. At first we were amused, then bemused and finally confused that he appeared to believe that the newsreader could actually hear him as he ranted at the TV. For his part he became increasingly vocal as they apparently ignored his helpful advice as to how they might do their job better. But I did share his frustration as the news moved from being about sharing information to feeding us someone else's interpretation of the information and then openly 'guiding' us as to how we will react to the news and then as it slipped further down to the formation of celebrity status for those delivering the news and those unfortunate enough to find the limelight. The arrival of Paul Holmes was the end of the world for Martin, and the end of our early evening TV watching. Martin's problem with Holmes was that the programme was promoted as current affairs, but the presenter talked all the time and didn't seem all that interested in listening to the answers to his questions. Then it became quite clear that the news and the truth were really quite secondary to the promotion of a celebrity – and for Martin, a miserable and tedious celebrity at that!

When the news becomes all about the deliverer and the delivery it does lose something of its credibility. We don't have to put up with any of that with John the Baptist and his 'breaking news.' It is clear with John that he is there to simply witness to the real thing, Jesus. John is doing nothing more than seeking to point his listeners to the light. He is the one sent ahead to prepare the way but he is not the way.

There is a tried and true technique for delivering news or for explaining something new to people. I am sure this is very familiar to any of you who have been trained in how to teach. It was pointed out to me by a young parishioner at St Stephens's, one I would have said was far too young to know such things but there you have it, the best lessons in life sometimes come from the most unexpected sources. It was in the early days of my internship training (just three years ago) and I was really struggling with the children's address part of the service. With children covering a wide range of ages, interests, and levels of enthusiasm, it was quite a challenge, particularly when I had had relatively little experience with children. One day the young person called me aside and said, why don't you start with an experience we have as children and then relate that to the bible story or concept you are trying to teach. She made it sound so simple and I was so grateful, that simple technique gave me a whole new window in to relating with them and opened up a world of creative ideas to connect with the kids. That she was still one of them at the time, blew me away, but also gave me confidence that she should know what she was talking about.

And this too is often how we get ourselves started with the preaching process. Begin where the people are, with something they know and work from there. By relating it to something we already know or have experienced we can learn new things easier. News too, comes in various forms. Sometimes it is less dramatic because it is a foreseeable development of the existing situation. Other news is more startling; maybe something we could not



have expected. But as soon as we hear it for the first time we set to work to make it fit with what we already know, so that it does not totally upset our previous way of understanding things. So with the good news of the gospel we have to integrate it into the general experience, particularly the religious experience, of humankind.

We have to show that it has a place in the whole seamless fabric of our human experience. We try to begin where people are at. To question this method seems perverse; it seems to go against our natural instincts. We want news, even the gospel news, to fit with our experience so that we can validate it and make sure that it is believable. But that is where so many come unstuck. For the newness of the gospel is so radical that it calls for a total reconstruction of belief. It defies being fitted nicely into our experience. The gospel requires that we suspend our instincts to begin with our own experience and having heard the gospel stories saying oh yes I get that, it's just like when blah blah blah. Instead it requires that we begin with the news and reconstruct ourselves according to that news. It's a bit like the hot shoeing/cold shoeing thing with horses I talked about months ago, when some of you played with idea of whether it was you or I who were the shoe or the horse... But you get the point, do we make the gospel fit our experiences or are we challenged and transformed to fit the gospel?

Some priests and Levites from Jerusalem were sent to question John the Baptist. "Who are you? Are you the Messiah?" "No," he replied, "I am not the Messiah." "What then?" they asked (doing exactly what I have been talking about) trying to fit John and his message into their existing categories, "Are you Elijah? Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." But they kept on at him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" And John replied, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord' just as the prophet Isaiah said. I baptize with water. But among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; and I am not worthy to even untie the thongs of his sandals." As much as John had something to say he was also getting out of the way... it wasn't about him – this coming gospel was something that he would also have to submit to. I wonder how often we find ourselves consciously or even unconsciously making decisions such as these. Times when we find ourselves in situations where we discern we need to take a deep breath and wait to see if there is something going on here that needs us to put our stuff to one side and submit because what is happening is bigger than us; maybe because we get a sniff of the gospel revealing itself amongst us. I look back over this last year, has it been one of the most testing in your lives? The earthquakes and the many issues they have thrown up, the St Giles church building damaged most likely beyond repair, the end of John's long ministry, the sense that a new chapter has to begin for St Giles – a chapter that might be radically different than any of the past ones... and I wonder how we will be before this.

I wonder if we can be hopeful and open to what God has for us even though we are tired and we cannot see all that clearly. We have seen in the Anglican community that there has been a rather public expression of some of the tensions and divisions that the calamities of the last year have brought about. It is not surprising that with the scale of the damage their churches have suffered that there will be tensions over what the 'what's next' will look like, but it is sad when it gets played out so publicly especially when so much of the media interest is speculative and can well end up contributing to the further straining of relationships. We know within our family circles how easily differences of opinion can escalate into the battle-lines being drawn and an inability to see the validity of another point of view. It could so easily happen to us given the magnitude of the challenges before us at St Giles.

Our church year begins at Advent and from the wilderness comes a call to make straight the way of the Lord, and submit to the gospel. The only way through the challenges facing us might be for all of us to let ourselves be challenged and transformed to fit the way of the gospel. What might that look like? Isaiah says this: he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; 2to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; 3to provide for those who mourn in Zion— to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory. 4They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.

We have so many opportunities here to shape our future church-life. What do we want it to look like? Which way will we follow? Will we give in to the temptation to fight for our own corners or will we submit to something bigger - a gospel shaped future? As you leave today there will be a flier available for each of you inviting you to be involved in this process. On February the 12th next year the Vision and Strategy Group, who have been working on your behalf, will present an update of the building information and some idea of where they have got to so far and give you an opportunity to contribute your ideas for the future. This group have not begun with what we have and where we are – they have begun with where and who we want to be and considered how we might get there. The flier will give you some things to think and pray about between now and then, so we can make the most of this opportunity.

Amen