

**Epiphany 2**  
**20/1/2019**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Isaiah 62:1-5**  
**Psalm 36**  
**1 Corinthians 12:1-11**  
**John 2:1-11**

## **Mourning and Dawn**

Sermon preached by Matt Julius

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*God, may my words be loving and true, and may those who listen discern what is not.  
Amen.*

In the revised preamble to the Uniting Church's constitution we confess that:

'The First Peoples of this country had already encountered the Creator God before the arrival of the colonisers; the Spirit was already in [*this*] land revealing God to the people through law, custom and ceremony. The same love and grace that was finally and fully revealed in Jesus Christ sustained the First Peoples and gave them particular insights into God's ways.'<sup>1</sup> (*UCA Revised Preamble to the Constitution §3*)

In the continuing attempt to listen to the particular insights of first peoples the national Assembly of the Uniting Church has set aside today as a day of mourning. A day that recalls us to the terrible history of the treatment of indigenous people in this country by second peoples. In setting aside this Sunday as a day of mourning the Uniting Church has sought to hear the voice of God through the voices of our indigenous brothers and sisters.

As we gather in this place, we acknowledge the commitment of the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation to nurturing this sacred Land from time immemorial. We acknowledge their elders: past, present, and emerging. We strive to hear their voices.

The commitment to listen to the voice of God through the voices of our indigenous brothers and sisters sets the context for my reflection on today's readings. This context challenges the very act of preaching and proclaiming the Gospel. The Uniting Church confesses that the very integrity of the Gospel was diminished by the church's failure to speak the truth about Australia's First Peoples, and in the church's complicity in dispossession.<sup>2</sup>

I want simply today to proclaim the Gospel with integrity. And to explore the way in which the proclamation of the Gospel can be both good *and* mournful news.

Our reading today from the latter part of Isaiah shows us how the proclamation of God to the world carries within it both goodness and mourning. This is a poem written out of the experience of exile, proclaiming hope for God's people. In holding together both the experience of exile and the proclamation of hope this poem may help to guide us to appreciate the mourning we are recalled to today.

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<sup>1</sup> *UCA Revised Preamble to the Constitution §3.*

<sup>2</sup> *UCA Preamble §5-6.*

Scholars have suggested that this latter part of Isaiah was written towards the end of the Jewish people's exile by the Babylonian empire - or perhaps during the period the Jewish people had newly returned to their homeland. This text, therefore, speaks out of an experience of people being stripped of their land, stripped of their identity, stripped of the cultural and religious practices that sustained their relationship to God. If we hear the words of Isaiah 62 as the words of a people trying to find their roots again in their own land, we may hear the solemn undertones of grief beneath the surface that talks of hope.

Isaiah speaks a word of hope on behalf of Zion, the land of the Jewish people, and a word of hope for Jerusalem.

“For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, | and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest | until her vindication shines out ...” (v1)

It is important to note the focus of Isaiah's hope: vindication. In pursuing vindication Isaiah does not simply hope that God's people would be happy in their land. But Isaiah recalls the period of exile and suffering through which God's people have come. Isaiah at this point refuses to understand the period of exile as a sign of failure or unfaithfulness, as a simple punishment from God. Vindication is the revelation that God's people are justified, are right with God, and have remained faithful through their experience of dispossession. In setting up this song of hope with a focus on vindication Isaiah carries the history of his people into this song.

Isaiah's hope is not abstract. It is not detached from reality. It does not look up to heaven and expect everything to be washed away. Isaiah's hope is rooted in the survival of his people. Isaiah's hope is rooted in resilience and return to land: in people who are faithful to God. (Faithful to a God who in turn is faithful, as in Psalm 36, whose steadfast love reaches from the land to the skies.)

That Isaiah forges his hope out of the experience of survival during the exile adds a solemn undertone to his hope:

“You shall no more be termed forsaken | and your land shall no more be termed desolate...” (v4)

For God's people have been through the many years of forsakenness in exile, the land still bearing the marks of their dispossession and of desolation.

The newness of life and name that are heard in Isaiah's song carries with it the memories and scars of the history of exile.

Isaiah, I suggest, teaches us about the solemn grief we are called to share with our indigenous brothers and sisters. By holding fast to the hope of God, but not allowing that hope to easily erase true and painful history.

Our indigenous brothers and sisters too have experienced dispossession. They too carry with them a history of pain, trauma, and suffering. Many were killed by the white settlers that built modern Australia. Many were subject to slavery, and slavery like conditions. Many were treated as little more than animals. Refused the basic rights that others enjoy: citizenship, voting rights, land rights. Children were stolen from first peoples. Our indigenous brothers and sisters have been shaped by experiences of survival. Experiences of forsakenness and desolation. We cannot erase this true and painful history.

And yet ...

Can we hear the ancient words of Isaiah's *hope* for our indigenous brothers and sisters?  
Can we bear a hope that refuses to see the suffering of first peoples as a just punishment?  
Can we bear a hope that does not erase solemn grief, and yet brings new life?

This is the task we recall ourselves to today. As we mark today as a day of mourning we are challenged by the hopeful song of Isaiah, that yet carries within itself solemn grief. We are challenged to ask ourselves what the hope of the Gospel might mean for our indigenous brothers and sisters. We are challenged to proclaim the Gospel with integrity.

The Gospel is the proclamation that in the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, Israel's Messiah, the reign of God's love has been established once and for all. This love is made visible through acts of mercy and justice. Through the Spirit we are empowered to faithfully participate in making this reign of love take root in this world. Like Isaiah we do not proclaim an abstract hope, detached from reality. But a hope rooted in the experiences of people who have suffered, people who have survived -- and many who have not. We preach a hope that moves towards us in Christ, and catches us up in the movement of God in the world. We preach of a love that traverses chasms, and reconciles communities.

To proclaim this Gospel with integrity means we must commit ourselves anew to the experiences of our indigenous brothers and sisters. We must commit ourselves to hearing their stories. We must commit ourselves to telling the truth about our collective history.

In so doing we participate in the ever unfolding reality of God's reign of love in the world. Echoing Isaiah:

For Australia's sake we must not keep silent, | and for the sake of our indigenous brothers and sisters we must not rest, | until their vindication shines out like the dawn ...

We must learn to understand our Christian hope in the light of Isaiah. Pursuing concrete forms of love, through mercy and justice. Rooting our hope in the history and the land in which we find ourselves.

In this may we follow Christ to the cross, and be led to the hope of resurrection.

*Amen.*

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