

EASTER 4

8TH MAY 2022

Psalm 23

The Revelation to John 7. 9-17

John 10. 22-30

Now you listen here. He's not the Messiah. He's just a very naughty boy!

So squawked the mother of Brian to the crowd who had come to her door wanting to make her son the Messiah in the film *The Life of Brian*. The crowd was desperate for a Messiah, so they had come to make Brian their glorious leader.

He's not the Messiah. He's just a very naughty boy! Now go away!

I can recall the furore created by the humourless defenders of Jesus who didn't understand the point of the film, gathering outside cinemas to protest the blasphemy against Jesus. Of course, like so many pious protesters, they hadn't seen the film or, if they had, they didn't understand the point it was trying to make – the human tendency of all groups to want to make someone Messiah. Anyone! Anyone, to make us feel secure. Even the hapless Brian.

It would be funny if it wasn't so tragic, but I am curious that Vladimir Putin seems to have been behind the door when the sense of humour was being handed out. His mission is to eradicate someone who captured his people's hearts and wills by being a clown for them. Beware the humourless is my experience.

I can recall being at the induction service of a colleague and friend a number of years ago and it came to the prayers of the people in the service. A member of the congregation came to the lectern to lead us in prayers focussed on the newly inducted minister. It was as though, as they began the prayer, the person leading figuratively took the minister and placed them on a pedestal and, as the prayer progressed, it was as though she was pumping a foot pump. Higher and higher the minister went in estimation and expectation. The Messiah had come amongst them! Oh, please spare her the adulation, I thought. There was a long way to fall by the time the end of the prayer came. And having had a number of falls, this minister really could not afford another one.

In all of the gospels there is this undercurrent of expectation that there will be a Messiah who will come to save Israel. As we heard the Sunday after Easter, as the two disciples walk along the road to Emmaus, they say to the risen Jesus – *but we thought he was the one to redeem Israel*.

We are all currently caught up in a Messiah-making escapade. The media playing off current prime minister against prospective prime minister in our minds and our hip pockets. *Save us from Morrison*, some are shouting; *anything but Albo*, cry others. *Freedom*, proclaims the overweight nickel miner from Queensland on ubiquitous yellow billboards.

Our church over a long period of time has developed a culture which valorises ministers, priests, clergy. Some of us avoid this attention like the plague. While others, the likes of Brian Houston, build a whole church around their immense egos. Eventually we all, probably by the grace of God, fall. And move on.

But the church has always had people in ministry; people who are set aside to nurture and lead. People who are both gifted by the spirit and equipped by the church in their training to support the life of the church. We have been doing this from the very earliest days – the Acts of the Apostles records the earliest disciples setting people apart by prayer and the laying on of hands. And setting people apart for the priestly role is something all faiths and cultures have done through time. The trouble for us is we are in a period of immense flux where everything about our way of doing everything is under scrutiny. So often the baby is thrown out with the bathwater, though, without proper examination of why. The trouble is that we were not clear why we were doing something in the first place.

The time after a minister leaves, the time in between ministries, is a delicate and vulnerable phase. In my presbytery role I saw so many congregations go into a kind of collective panic. Quick, what do we do now? We didn't think this was ever going to come to an end. And everything grinds to a halt. Some say in one way or another, well that was all a mistake, let's start again – let's go back to the way things were before <insert minister's name here> came along. Or some say when a minister moves on: it's all over, what's the point.? *I'm going fishing*, we heard Peter say in last week's gospel. Some are paralysed by grief. Others rush to occupy the space – come on folks – I'll save you. And there is an anxious rush to fill the gap left by the departed minister. What I found in my presbytery involvement was this time of vacancy is a time of anxiety and uncertainty. And the reality is also that, as you found after Joan Wright and Fiona Winn left, this time of vacancy can be protracted and demanding on the local leadership.

You are in now a profoundly liminal point in your life: you are in a very protracted planning phase to realise a new set of buildings; your existing buildings have been demolished; we have all survived two years of the uncertainty and disruption of COVID, and; you are now entering a period of ministerial vacancy. As you are in the midst of this liminal time in your life, you are in the right place to examine the question of why ordained ministry, for what purpose? The question cannot simply be reduced to some question about whether you can afford full-time ministry or not; it is an invitation to reflect on what you need at this time, the character of the ministry you seek to sustain you as Jesus' disciples. While there will be economic issues at play, this should not be the first thing you reflect on together; and it should not be the last measure of how you shape your life. All of this said, I believe you have the leadership in a place where these questions will be given proper consideration.

When fourteen or so of us read *The Church as Salt* by Sally Douglas, minister at Richmond Uniting Church, earlier in the year, we were encouraged by her to be reconciled with the reality that the church is smaller. We were challenged to give up the belief, which our society feeds us, that big is proof of the rightness of what we are doing. And, that small equals failure. Sally reminded us of Jesus' saying: *you are the salt of the earth*. She writes of the littleness of salt; the humanity in the saltiness of our tears; the salty wombs from which we emerge into the world; the preserving quality of salt and the need for us to salt our dishes in order to make them tasty. The character of salty people is the posture of hopefulness. Our culture mostly tells us that hope is about hoping for some-thing, a particular outcome. Of course, this is our natural human tendency to anticipate concrete outcomes. But the nature of Christian hope is really about an orientation; a way of being in the world. Paul writes: hope does not disappoint us.

The Revelation to John is written to a group of churches which are undergoing extreme persecution. Revelation is a vision written to engender hope and to orient its hearers toward a

vision of divine vindication of the Lamb who was slain. The confronting images and strange anticipations of the book are quite possibly not something we hold out for. Nevertheless, the vision draws us forward and galvanises our resolve to be part of that multitude, oriented toward the throne, with our hearts filled with joy and our wills shaped by the love which traverses death.

As we go our separate ways, we all continue to travel in that great tide of followers through time and space, united in life, and beyond, by the Crucified and Risen One. In him is our joy, our unity, our peace, our life. Thanks be to God.

Andrew Boyle