

# Alternative Reality

Sermon for the 8<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Year B, 18 July 2021

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT Australia

**The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell**

Jeremiah 23: 1-16; Psalm 23; Ephesians 2: 11-22; Mark 6: 30-34, 53-56

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

This week past, in the American state of Florida it became illegal to teach critical race theory in public schools—the latest front in the culture wars, which makes the widely acknowledged claim that racism is structured into the attitudes and institutions of predominantly white societies. Throughout America, and not just in Florida, the point is to protect white children from hearing that America has anything to be ashamed of, even though it made a religious, political and economic culture out of chattel slavery, and even though the post-Civil war Jim Crow era doesn't seem to be over, as black suffrage and black lives are still being undermined. This recalls older bans on teaching evolution in public schools, because of course white children mustn't be allowed to hear that they're cut from the same cloth as black and brown people, when everyone

knows that Adam and Eve were white and that dark skin only came with the Fall.

Meanwhile, the Republican party leadership remains committed to Donald Trump's shameless lie about a stolen election, and everywhere Republican state legislatures are passing new laws to restrict voting access for poorer black and brown communities. They're hoping that next year they'll win back both houses of Congress for their rightful owners. Then, in 2024, Trump may very well attempt a second coming with his new promise to 'Save America'—save it, that is, from black and brown people who'll take over if somebody doesn't stop them.

And if the King and his ministers are corrupt, so are the Murdoch media prophets of fake news, and so are the priests. Trump's rusted-on Evangelical support lines up with America's conservative Catholic bishops who oppose Joe Biden, wanting to ban him from Holy Communion because he hasn't opposed abortion on demand. But I doubt very much if these conservative Christians and their highly partisan political leaders genuinely care for the unborn. Instead, it's the power and social influence of their version of religion that's being aborted, and they want it back. So, throne and altar align once again, that old historical partnership, in America's case by tens of millions

overlooking the plain fact that Trump and his congressional backers are amoral cynics, fantasists, nihilists, spoilers and liars.

And in case I sound perhaps a tad politically partisan myself, I should be very clear that the answer isn't a revolution by the radical left.

The so-called woke left is very quick to stage its own pogroms and deploy its version of revolutionary terror on journalists, writers, teachers and school leaders, academics and media commentators if they deviate by a whisker from the politically correct line.

So, for every voice on the left attacked for calling America's race record into question—for confronting children with the facts of white privilege and black disadvantage—there's a voice on the right that's cancelled for being transphobic, when all they might have done was sympathise with those who want to keep women's sport for biological women, or who question today's fast-accelerating rush of teenage girls into gender reassignment—because for many of them, being a boy has come to seem so much easier than being a girl.

And so, friends, everything the prophet Jeremiah decried in our Old Testament reading today is still going strong; it's business as usual in the world of us versus them. Though today, grievance is the dominant reality on both sides of the culture wars, in what American

philosopher Stephen Gardner called “the circular firing squad of modern victimology”. Jeremiah in our Old Testament reading today laments craven betrayal by King, prophet and priest, at the expense of God’s beloved people, and he declares that God isn’t going to stand for it—that history will eventually catch up with these people and a new day will dawn for their victims.

Because, friends, Jeremiah inhabits an alternative reality. So does the psalmist, in today’s wonderful words from Psalm 23 that have comforted God’s people in grief, danger and trouble ever since ancient times: “the Lord is my shepherd, therefore can I lack nothing...” .

We Christians inhabit the same alternative reality in Jesus Christ, who reveals that alternative reality in our Gospel today. His heart goes out to the crowds, who are like sheep without a shepherd. These crowds are hungry for God’s mercy, and hungry to touch the fringe of Jesus’ cloak—the fringe, by the way, the wearing of which was mandated in the book of Numbers as a reminder of God’s commandments, and which in today’s Gospel becomes an interpretative tool taking us to the heart of God’s commandments, and of Christian ethics, which are chiefly and simply about learning to inhabit the mercy of God. Because, friends, this is who Jesus is from

God, inviting us to become agents of God's mercy, too—gathered under his cloak, if you like, and gathering others.

This alternative reality that Jesus brings shows up the corrupt Kings, prophets and religious leaders of every age—and not least in our day, when stubbornly ignorant populism is on the rise while a climate-challenged earth catches fire and a habitable human future recedes. What we need instead is the mercy of God for a planet in peril, which is the theme that some of us will be exploring together in our parish's 'Winter Journey' this year.

Our epistle today, from Ephesians chapter 2, spells out what this alternative reality looks like in institutional form. Because, of course, Jesus isn't a dead founder or an inspiring teacher, but he's the living Lord of this Holy Catholic Church, of which you and I are marked as members now and for eternity by our baptism. It's a community called by God to live beyond the perennial division that constitutes wider human existence.

In its original setting, in the earliest churches, the division was between Jew and Gentile. Today the stubborn defining divisions are between Christians on opposing sides of the culture wars, or on opposing sides of the Catholic-Protestant divide, or on opposing sides of the so-called worship wars that have split Anglicans into

scarcely compatible styles of Christian, and of course on opposing sides in the ever-popular parish stoush.

But our merciful God is crying out 'No' to all this, and I quote from our Epistle, because "in Christ Jesus you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us" (Eph 2: 13-14). So, there's no monopoly on righteousness for us to claim, no acceptability to God for us to earn, no thinking ourselves better than those who are locked with us in mutual opposition. Because the Church isn't first about us but about God; the Church is God's doing, God's human story, God's sacrament in the tangle of history. It's not our property, it's not our badge of respectability, and its borders aren't ours to patrol. And all because it's the mercy of God, and Christ's shepherding a shepherdless people, that makes the Church.

Hence, friends, we cling to the liturgy and fellowship of word and sacrament as if lives depend on it. Because they do; because the corrupt, deluded, vicious reality that Jeremiah laments is alive and well, and because in the mercy of God you and I have been summoned to be part of Jesus Christ's alternative reality.

The Lord be with you ...