

High St Uniting Church Frankston

Walking the Holy Pathway

Isaiah 35: 1 - 10



The opening address for the start of one of the college years was from one of our theological professors and in simple language, rather than grand theological terms, it discussed the question, “Does God suffer or feel pain?” It comes from the stream of theology that considers God as perfect, and perfection means no suffering or defect. And it is this idea of perfection that drives the understanding of holiness for a lot of people. The

Biblical call to ‘be holy as God is holy’ leads, for many people, to thoughts of moral and behavioural perfection. Chapter 19 of Leviticus is part of what is called the Holiness Code, the list of laws aimed at imitating God’s holiness and perfection. And there have been numerous attempts throughout the history of the church to set up communities, and indeed cities, that run on a holiness code, a set of rules and laws to enact moral perfection. Not only did they fail, but they also demonstrated that there is no joy in living your life by a set of rules and laws. That’s where we get the term ‘wowsers’ from. It is why satirists like W. S. Gilbert took delight in spearing the Methodists of the late 19th Century. I remember the worry in youth group that our parents would discover that we were playing cards in the church hall! No joy, just a constant sense of paranoia.

But, as Christians, we see Jesus demonstrating a very different definition of God’s holiness. God’s holiness meant coming to earth as a human. God’s holiness meant breaking laws to come beside people and address their fears, their needs, and their weakness. And look at the joy that Jesus brought and inspired, thousands of people gathering to hear and to see that God cared for them without demanding something from them. If we are to be holy as God is holy, then we need to live a life of love that places people above laws.

And in today’s reading from Isaiah, we find the same lesson. The highway of return to God – The Holy Way – that is for God’s people, is not for the perfect and the morally upright. This is the pathway for the blind, the deaf, the lame and the dumb. It’s the highway for those with weak hands and feeble knees, and even the simple minded will travel without getting lost.

Biblical scholars tell us that in the compilation of what we have as the book of Isaiah, this chapter, 35, and the preceding chapter, got inserted in the wrong place and really belong with chapter 40, referring to the return from Babylon. You can see that connection because we remember chapter 40, “In the wilderness make a way, in the desert make a highway.” But as a stand-alone chapter, these words of the way of God speak to more than that one situation. Here is the God of welcome and healing who turns the wildernesses of our lives into flowering gardens and the deserts of doubt into wetlands. Here is the God of welcome and healing who embraces and reverses weakness and disability. The Holy Way, that the unclean cannot travel, is about welcome and safety and is for those who have been set free from whatever keeps them away from God. And here is yet one more point of connection between Isaiah and the story of Jesus. The list of those welcomed onto the Holy Way – the blind, the deaf, the lame and the dumb – looks a lot like the list of outcomes of Jesus’ ministry that he offers to the disciples of John, when they come asking if Jesus is the Promised One of God. John may have been expecting great acts of retribution against the

evil, or a divine revolution against the Romans, but what he gets is a reminder of the prophetic vision that God's way is to stand with the people and bring grace and healing and welcome.

Now, when Jesus points out to John's disciples the results of bringing God close to people, he isn't promising something like the Prosperity Gospel – come to God through Jesus and have all your problems taken away, he is saying to the Christian community, to us, that we should be a place of welcome and healing for all, and not a closed club for the morally and physically perfect. Something we have forgotten so many times over the centuries. We need to redefine holiness in our communities, just as the passage from Isaiah redefines unclean. The unclean who are excluded from the Holy Way aren't those with physical or moral defects, it's not like the lepers of old who had to cry out, "Unclean," if people got too close. The unclean for Isaiah are those who reject God and endanger God's people. And so, we need to redefine holiness so that we can engage with the world the way that God has and does. Instead of seeking perfection, let's embrace humanity. Then our eyes, that get blinded by beauty and style, can be opened to see humanity. Our ears, that hear warnings about strangers, can be opened to hear the cries of the poor. And our speech, that can become full of judgement and guidelines, can become a message of love that will bring joy to the world.

This journey of Advent, that we have pictured as a pathway up the mountain of God towards peace, and the way of hope for God's new creation, is also the pathway of God's great enveloping, welcoming holiness. A holiness that isn't about restriction and rules but the joyous revelation that God is with us and calling us to be with each other. A holiness not found in the carefully choreographed and purified rituals of the Temple, but in the messiness and noise of an animal stall and a feeding trough and a birth. A holiness that brings forth joy because we are not bound by restrictions, but set free to live out love and rejoice in God's Holy Way.