

St Brandon's, Sermon for 17th March 2024.

Jeremiah 31:31-34, John 12: 20-33

"I've heard that before!"

Alison Hobbs

When I looked at today's readings to see what I was going to preach on, my first response was "I've heard that before!" It felt as though the reading was repeating the text I preached on last time: hmmm, helpful, or a hindrance?

We often hear different takes on the same theme, and often feel as though we've heard a story or phrase echoed somewhere else in the bible ... we might even recall where!

I realised I could hear the phrase being said in different tones, in a positive tone, expressing affirmation and wonder: "I've heard that before!?"

And in negative tones: the tone of cynicism "I've heard *that* before!!"

The tone of boredom "I've *heard* that before!"

So I decided to look at today's readings with reference to that phrase: "I've heard that before!"

I last preached on the first Sunday of Lent, and the reading from Mark 8, urging us to take up our cross and follow him ... because those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for Jesus' sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. And today, on the 5th Sunday of Lent, we hear almost the same from John 12: "*those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.*"

At the start of Lent we are given our instructions: carry out acts of service, that will teach us what Jesus is getting at about death and life. Now, a month on, we are being urged to keep going with this focus on service to others because it is going to shed light on Jesus's actions as he confronts his decisions about his own death.

It is a repetition to remind and reinforce the importance of a central teaching about service. And if we have followed the instruction, we just might be meeting this message feeling a bit different about ourselves and how we use our time, our choices. That will colour how we hear and relate to the events of Holy week and Easter, which will all start happening next Sunday.

The story and meaning of Jesus' life and death is extraordinarily complex: multi-layered and mysterious. The gospels are written with the aim of helping us learn his teachings without losing sight of the mystery that points us to his divinity. When we read the bible and think "I've heard that before!" what we are getting are cues, and clues towards solving a puzzle, an elusive puzzle.

When in today's reading Jesus says, "*The hour has come*", we think, 'when have I heard that before?' We heard it in John 4 at the wedding in Cana, in negative version, when Jesus initially declined because '*His hour had not yet come*' but then went ahead, turning water into wine. Doing so, launched his ministry, revealing his glory – the disciples glimpsed his divinity and believed.

We heard it in the negative again in John 7 and 8 when Jesus declines to go to the festival in Jerusalem because there are plots to kill him, '*my time has not yet come*' He then does go, and openly teaches in the temple, and is divinely protected: '*Then they tried to arrest him but no-one laid hands on him, because his hour had not yet come.*'

The hour expresses the time Jesus has and needs to fulfil his ministry. Now the ministry is nearing completion: the Greeks are asking, responding to the message and believing: he has reached to the gentiles, his Word going beyond Israel to the whole world. Now the harvest is near: the imagery of the seed, as both the Word and His dying yielding a rich harvest.

Recognising the hour has come, Jesus has to face the choice about serving – giving – to the end. We get a glimpse of the agony of that choice: '*my soul is troubled ... what should I say?*'

If we were reading chronologically, we might have said "I've heard that before!" because in the previous chapter, Jesus is similarly '*greatly*

disturbed in spirit' as he prepares to encounter Lazarus in the tomb, before raising him. Echoes and clues that there are parallels for Jesus just ahead that he will have to face and trust God.

Facing the fears, acknowledging the choice, nonetheless, he declares full obedience. The choice is made: use me, glorify me, and God responds. Another, "I've heard that before!" moment as we read, '*Then a voice came from heaven*'. We are taken back to Jesus' baptism, and the holy spirit descending on Jesus at the start of his ministry as God's voice from heaven declares "*This is my Son, with whom I am well pleased*". The declaration heralds or triggers the time of testing: at the start, with the temptations in the wilderness, now as the events pile in: betrayal, kangaroo courts, all the evil of the world: and he will drive them out, overcoming evil, this time, for all time, in the fullness of time.

If we are steeped in the Christian story, we are likely to say, "I've heard that before!" when hearing the passage from Jeremiah. We hear echoes: Jesus refers to a new covenant at the last supper, puts his law within us: 'eat me', 'dwell in me, and I in you'. The free response of the heart. Phrases that draw us into his love, in the way he talks of drawing all people to himself when he is lifted up: that is, crucified, and raised again.

Its okay, inevitable even, that we do that, finding a continuity between Old and New testament. However, Jeremiah was prophesying to his time, to Israel who had strayed, and to them like to us, God is immensely generous. If, and when, they recognise their fault and ask forgiveness, instead of saying, "I've heard *that* before!!" God promises a new start, an even deeper commitment to them. "Have we heard that before?"

Why does the church insist on reading the same readings, telling the same story, year after year? It's understandable if people who attend only at Christmas and Easter say, "I've heard that *before!*", if familiarity produces boredom and superficiality.

The intention by repeating the cycle through the year is to create movement within us. Not a circling round and round but a spiralling down and deeper.

Each time we hear the stories and celebrate the mysteries we are touched and changed, we see and learn more.

It is a lifetime journey that aims to move us towards complying with the gospel message of service: loving God and neighbour in words and actions.

Then to move us further, beyond complying to desiring.

Desiring to serve and love God and neighbour.

And as we engage more fully, drill deeper, we may begin to understand Jesus better in his strange words about losing and hating our life. We may begin to learn obedience and try to exercise it.

Obedience being the free choice Jesus made, to obey his Father; the free response of love to being loved; of giving because we have received. Of following with minds and hearts renewed, not merely walking the walk, complying.

Every year we are invited to hear the stories again. Every Eucharist we are invited to hear the Easter story again, of God's love for us, and the Son's saving work for and in us.

So, this Easter, listen up, listen out, listen deep, when you find yourself saying "I've heard that before!"

Amen