

“I will listen”

**Sermon preached by Rev. Laurel Barr at Roseville Uniting Church
on December 7 2008**

**Psalm 85
Isaiah 40:1-11
Mark 1:1-8**

Into the constant loud noise of our lives, the Psalm for this week offers a piece of radical wisdom: “I will listen”

The late Swiss psychiatrist and Christian writer Paul Tournier was widely regarded for his perceptive insights into human behaviour and need. As an older man he made this observation:

“People lack silence. They no longer lead their own lives; they are dragged along by events. It is a race against the clock. I think that what so many people come to see me for is to find a quiet, peaceful person who knows how to listen and who isn’t thinking all the time about what he has to do next. If your life is chock-full already, there won’t be room for anything else. Even God can’t get anything else in.” *

I can’t speak for you but Tournier touches a raw nerve for me. And I wonder this morning in the tumult of our lives - in the momentous and complex events happening in the world - in the persistent noise of the media following us everywhere we go - in the midst of voices competing for our attention, if this is not true in some sense for God too. I wonder if God is longing for people who will make room in their lives to listen? * In Psalm 85 verse 8 the Psalmist writes

“I will listen to what the Lord says.”

What a thing to say less than three weeks to Christmas? Our diaries packed full with preparations for end of year activities and Christmas are dragging us along with irresistible momentum so that many of us feel all we can do is to go with it. On the other hand “I will listen” or “Let me hear” are phrases that make us pause, reflect and intentionally make room for God.

And if we listen to the readings from the prophet Isaiah and Mark’s Gospel this morning we hear two powerful voices from the wilderness.

With Isaiah we hear a voice crying out for the construction of a road through the desert so that God’s people in exile can go home. In Mark, we hear John the Baptist’s unsettling call to repentance.

In both of these readings we are reminded that Advent is not just a season to prepare for the celebration of the nativity - this time of Advent is much broader than that. Advent is really about preparing ourselves to be part of the coming Kingdom of God - it is about making the time to be ready and involved in the reconfiguring of this world.

As the Psalm goes on to say so beautifully and hopefully. We are being called to make the time to prepare for when the glorious presence of God will be fully realised amongst us and faithful love and loyalty will join together, when right living and peace will embrace and kiss, when truth will spring out of the earth and justice will lean down from heaven.

The Psalmist says, "I am listening. What is God's message?" And God's message is "peace to God's people" - but only to those who make room for God in their lives - or as the New Jerusalem Bible puts it, peace for those "who renounce their folly."

Advent according to Isaiah and Mark is about "serious road construction"**. And we all know how roadworks can be disruptive and cause major inconvenience. What Isaiah is talking about "is not filling potholes and repairing the curbs". He is calling for "major reconfiguration" of the geography of the land - valleys are to be filled in and mountains are to be leveled. Rugged land and rough country are to be steamrolled until they are smooth.

And then In Mark's Gospel, John the Baptist cries out for the people to repent - in other words to **stop** in their tracks and **to take time** to look at themselves - to look into their hearts - to listen to themselves and look at what they are doing - to stop and listen and to observe how their actions and words are affecting others and most importantly God and God's purposes - John the Baptist is calling for major change in the people's lives. You see to repent is to do a U-turn and to move in a completely new direction.

John the Baptist cries out, Repent! Acknowledge your frailty and shortcomings - be honest and confess those things and attitudes in your hearts and in the life of your community which are **not** of God - those attitudes that are self-centred and look only to your own needs and fears: self-righteousness which sees only the shortcomings of others and not your own shortcomings - greed, anger, resentment, lack of trust - all those things which strain and break our relationships with each other and with God.

The baptism of repentance which John offers is an act in which the people are urged to be honest with themselves as God sees them - in which they ask forgiveness, and washed clean in the water before emerging to make a new beginning ready to walk in God's ways - to live with integrity, with compassion and with grace towards others - faithful to God and making a positive effort to make peace.

Listening to Isaiah and John the Baptist, we hear the voice of God calling for radical transformation of the landscape of our lives and community. But such transformation can't happen when we simply allow ourselves to be dragged along by events and moulded by the anxieties and uncertainties around us. Looking beyond ourselves we are hit by so much bad news about what is happening around the world with terrorist attacks and wars and epidemics and exploitation and it is easy to react with a sense of fear and powerlessness and even resentment and cynicism. Transformation requires us to intentionally make room for it to happen. It requires us to be proactive.

For example earlier I told a story to the children from Bethlehem. Bethlehem is one of the most contentious places on earth - here three faiths meet in a political hotspot involving conflict between Israel and its Arab neighbours. Some of us at our evening worship *Chewing the Faith* and in our small groups have heard about a simple thing we can do this Christmas. In Bethlehem there is what is called the Arab Educational Institute. It engages with people of the Christian, Muslims and Jewish faiths. Its emphasis is upon education and it works to make peace and to build community on the basis of non-violence. The Arab Educational Institute is supported by the World Council of Churches Palestine-Israel ecumenical Forum, PAX Christi and other international Christian organisations.

And this year as the world focuses upon Christ's birthplace, the idea is that people from all round the world email messages and prayers to the Institute who will distribute them among the people of modern day Bethlehem in order to encourage them. We can be overcome and paralysed by the enormity of the conflict in the Middle East or we can be proactive by engaging in a simply practical activity that bears witness to the peace that God's reign is all about. You can get the address on one of these leaflets.

'I will listen to what God the Lord says" the Psalmist says. And in Psalm 85 the Psalmist says this because he is painfully aware of the need for reconstruction and change in his people's lives and experience. He is aware that all is not right between his people and God. The beautiful words of peace and affirmation from verse 8 in Psalm 85 follow these words of petition.

Restore us again, O God of our salvation,

and put away your indignation toward us.

Will you be angry with us forever?

Will you prolong your anger for all generations?

Will you not revive us again

so that your people may rejoice in you?

Show us your steadfast love, O Lord, and grant us your salvation.

Psalm 85 echoes the tension of John the Baptist and Isaiah and the tension that we live in when the reality of our lives and relationships - the reality of what we say and do to each other - the reality of this broken world that can be so crippling and disappointing and disillusioning, has put a huge distance between us and God.

But today if we make room for God - if we listen to God with repentant hearts cleansed and ready to receive Christ - if we listen with our minds and wills prepared to be changed then out of the silence we will hear the voice of God speaking to us and directing us.

From Isaiah they are words of comfort and hope that God is here. God is here speaking, breathing, feeding, comforting and forgiving us.

From Mark's Gospel they are words not only of repentance but of the good news that the One who comes is the Stronger One who baptises us not just in water but with the powerful transforming Holy Spirit.

In the Psalm those who make room to listen to the voice of God are blessed by God's love and faithfulness and righteousness and peace.

And at the Lord's Table those of us who listen will hear Christ's words of unconditional love: "This is my body broken for you." This is my blood of the new covenant poured out for you and for everyone for the forgiveness of sins."

And so Friends, today I invite you to put all else in your busy lives and crowded minds and passionate hearts aside and to listen.

Tune out of the confusing and distracting voices and listen for what God is saying to you - to us.

In Paul Tournier's words, let's not be "dragged along by events".

Let's stop for a moment and make room for what is most important - our relationship with God who comes to us in Christ - our part in God's plans for this community here in Roseville and all God's peoplefor Christ comes to bring reconciliation and peace and hope.

Let's spend a few moments in quiet prayer.....

Almighty and loving God, in the midst of the busyness and noise of our lives, may we make room for you
- give us eyes to see, ears to listen, and a will to follow your voice. *Amen.

* David Buschart, *Dragged along?*, 10 July 2006 www.journeywithjesus.net

** Dianne Bergant CSA "Do You Hear Voices?", December 2, 2002, *America, The National Catholic Weekly*,
www.americamagazine.org

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