

## Third Sunday of Epiphany

Fr Jonathan Jong

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

1 Corinthians 7:29-31

Mark 1:14-20

+In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

We are a long way away from the apocalypticism of St Paul: melting polar ice caps and big buttons in the small hands of stable geniuses notwithstanding, we are no longer in the end-of-the-world prediction business. The form of this world does not seem to be going anywhere, and we have carried on with our mourning and rejoicing, our marrying and dealing and purchasing, lulled into that common complacency that transubstantiates Christmas into a consumerist fantasy and Easter into a marketing ploy for confectionary.

But we are also a long way away from the realised eschatology of the late-1980s, when the political scientist Francis Fukuyama was celebrated for claiming that we had arrived at the end of history. The Wall was coming down, a sacrament of the definitive triumph of something called “western liberal democracy” against its rivals, first fascistic ethno-nationalism, then socialist totalitarianism. The end of history was, for Fukuyama, the end of ideology. The victor was obvious: the whole world would now be baptised in the name of liberalism, and of democracy, and of capitalism. He is, of course, wrong that these three make one harmonious substance, as we now know having watched the failures of capitalism turn democracy against liberalism. On both sides of the North Sea and of the Atlantic, after the 2008 financial crisis, we have felt for ourselves the waves of xenophobia and weaponised nostalgia.

These two declarations of the end times—St Paul’s and Fukuyama’s—though both wrong, could not be more different. The early Church’s belief that the end was nigh led to the repudiation of entrenched social and economic categories as well as to the reconfiguration of human relationships by the redefinition and expansion of kinship. *All who believed were together and had all things in common*, we read in the Acts of the Apostles, *they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need*. Live as though you were unmarried, St Paul tells his Corinthian brothers and sisters. In contrast, Fukuyama’s belief that the end had already come produces a sort of cultural boredom, in which our ideological confrontations give way to solutions-oriented “conversations” within and between coalitions of barely distinguishable parties who have compromised their way into something that they can pass off as peace and prosperity.

St Paul’s picture of the end of history is more morally demanding, but we have, for the past few decades,

been squatting in Fukuyama's world. At least here in the West, revolution is just a fading memory, which might explain our shock and horror at revolutionary eruptions among radicals in the Muslim world and in the far right of our own backyards. St Paul and, for that matter, Jonah might not have been caught so unawares.

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It is a truth universally acknowledged by theologians that Christianity is not an ideology, in the sense of a belief system through which power is exerted, and as such cannot it be co-opted by political partisans. This is true enough, except that it has never been true. Christianity is always being co-opted: by crusaders, by empire, by capital. We have never really learned to escape from thinking of God as our tribal deity, in whose name and by whose flaming chi-rho we will convert the heathens or limit the freedoms of those who dare disagree with us. This is the chief way in

which the Church has betrayed our founder: we have courted power, received it, and been perverted by it. The fact that the established Church now feels beleaguered and embattled in the modern world is a symptom of our addiction to power.

We—those of us who, for better or worse, are suspicious of all hegemony and have bought instead into the vision of a pluralistic society in which freedoms are equitably negotiated—(we) worry about this kind of ideological Christianity, by which we invariably mean the Christianities that are not ours. But even when it comes to our own particular version of Christian faith, we wring our hands and bite our tongues, thinking that the only way to avoid corruption is to remain inoffensive: heaven forbid that we should be a scandal to the Tories and folly to the Labour Party. So deeply have we internalised the need to privatise religion that it has joined the ranks of sex, death, and money: topics banned from polite conversation. We are, to put it mildly, reticent to

proselytise; a word now avoided even at seminaries, and which has come to be associated with other such undesirables as colonialism, imperialism, and Americans.

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In contrast, we heard this morning:

*Follow me and I will make you become fishers of men.*

And immediately, they quit their jobs—Simon and Andrew, and the sons of Zebedee—and spent the next three years on the road with Jesus, healing the sick, setting the captives free, preaching the gospel of God.

*Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.* And Jonah goes, and the city repents, from the greatest the least, saved from their own wickedness. He goes, but first he refuses, and jumps off a boat only to be eaten and then

regurgitated by a sea monster, before he arrives at such amenable a disposition.

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I know that none of us are going to walk into London—only eleven-and-a-half hours' walk, by the way, from Uxbridge to Upminster—I know that none of us are going to walk into London) to proclaim the imminent collapse of the government, conditional upon mass repentance and worship of the one true God.

But I also know that I wouldn't be here in this pulpit if a bunch of pimply teenagers had been too shy to invite me to their Methodist Youth Group. (Now you know who to blame.) Not all of us are lucky enough to be cradle Anglicans: and many of you who are can probably tell your own stories about the people without whom you wouldn't be sitting here at Mass today.

The world did not end in the first century, nor did history end in the twentieth. And through all this time—through the rising and falling of empires, the fads and fashions of -isms down the ages—the call of God has not changed: we are still called to follow Jesus and become fishers of men; we are still called to rise up and go; to proclaim the good news we have received.

Nor has the good news changed. It is that we are completely and absolutely loved by one who being absolutely complete is in need of nothing and therefore has no designs upon us. We are, in other words, not the products of the parental quest for symbolic immortality; nor are we objects trapped under depersonalising sexual gazes; nor are we constituents to be bribed or tricked into surrendering power under the illusion of choice; nor are we human resources, valued for our contribution to the gross domestic product.



No, we are loved without even the possibility of reciprocation, by God who is nothing other than love. We are so loved that God crosses and collapses those unimaginable divides between creator and creation, heaven and earth, life and death. And if these divisions have crumbled, then no divisions can stand, and all creaturely relationships must be disrupted. St Paul is at his least reactionary in that epiphanous moment when he sees that Jesus leaves nothing untouched: neither sorrow, nor joy; nor marriage, nor commerce.

The gospel is, in this sense, a totalising discourse, but is not for all that an ideology, simply because rather than exerting power, Christ subverts power by surrendering it to us. With it, we murdered him, but in response he offers us his body and blood that he may dwell in us and draw us up to himself. Instead of our just deserts, we are met with love's embrace.

This is what got me hooked in the first place. The meritocracy which I imbibed, with most other Malaysian Chinese kids from aspirational middle-class families, was shown up by the absurdity and gratuity and stubbornness of love. To be sure, this good news is unsettling and uncomfortable, and demands from those who hear it nothing less than our entire lives. It changes everything. And that's the mission, of course: to change everything, because everything has already been changed.

Credit where credit is due: the evangelicals are right on this one. If this isn't news worth telling everyone, I don't know what is.

+In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**