

**THEOLOGY THAT LIBERATES** (17<sup>TH</sup> November 2019, Lindfield)

**ISAIAH 65:17-25**

We all have favourite verses and passages that mean a lot to us. Some change over time and some develop as we grow older and our understanding deepens. For instance we may have learnt the hymn, "Jesus loves me this I know" at Sunday School, we may still remember the words! Then we learnt that God's love was wider so we learnt, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son". After that we realised that we are all made in God's image so we understand from the Apostle John, "God is love and whoever lives in love lives in God and God lives in them."

Then there are verses or stories that we remember at particular times or circumstances. For example when I am going through a difficult time I take comfort in the promise, "I will never leave you or forsake you". What we cling on to changes with our circumstances.

This was true for Israel. They were in captivity in Babylon. They were despondent and felt abandoned by God. "How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" they lamented. So Isaiah gives them good news of a time that is coming when they will be back in their homeland. They will never be taken away again. The language of Ch. 65 is extravagant and luxurious. They will build homes in which they will live. They will plant vines and they will eat its fruit. No conqueror will dispossess them. It will be so peaceful that the lion will lay down with the lamb. This era of coming peace and prosperity gave them hope and the ability to survive until it happened. They did return to Israel and the Temple was re-built.

It was a message for them in their situation. It was what they needed. It was God's word in their context – their particular situation. Of course ALL theology is contextual. It is never done in a vacuum. Paul's letters were written to address particular problems or situations in the towns where the churches were placed. Things he says to the Corinthians are not mentioned to the Philippians because they were not relevant to them.

In the 1970s much of Central America was in the grip of military dictatorships. These became ruthless and did anything to cling to power. People trying to protect their small farms and fend off crippling taxes were branded "communists" and were rounded up and imprisoned and often executed. Local priests often lead the resistance against this tyrannical rule and themselves were labelled enemies of the State. There were even leaflets handed out in El Salvador which read: *Remove a Communist – kill a Priest*. Ultimately the Archbishop of El Salvador, Oscar Romero was

murdered saying Mass one Sunday morning. For almost 20 years these poor people from Central America had very few worldly goods and little hope. What they clinged to was the hope of a better life to come. Passages about Heaven and judgement. Stories of a new heaven and a new earth were what sustained them. This was called Liberation Theology because in the midst of so much suffering they could feel liberated – even in the face of death.

Liberation Theology became a subset of Contextual Theology.

Your life is its own context. No-one is experiencing what you are experiencing at the moment. That part of the faith that sustains and supports you now, today, might be very different from what someone else needs today.

Israel needed to know God had not abandoned them and they would be returning to their homeland. The people of Central America needed to know there was a better life that awaited them where suffering and injustice would be no more. You need what you need. I need what I need.

That is why we sometimes come out of church and say, "I didn't get much out of that today". That may be because it wasn't what you needed at that moment but it may have been exactly what someone else needed to hear. We preachers choose a scripture from the 4 reading laid down each week from which to preach. If we chose one of the other passages we would have written a completely different sermon. My habit is to read the passages either Sunday night or Monday morning and pray about which one I might preach on. When that is decided I get to work and no longer consider the others. Over the years there have been a few occasions when I have written a sermon then on the Sunday morning I have felt that I should speak on another passage so I have spoken "off the cuff" on another passage entirely. We must always be open to God's leading.

Only you know your context. Only you live your context. We come to church to learn more about our faith so we have a broader knowledge base from which to draw when we need to. The "Jesus loves me this I know" or "Jesus wants me for a sunbeam" is fine for kids but it doesn't sustain us when we have adult problems and adult questions and adult doubts. Our faith needs to mature as we mature. That's why so many young people are lost to the church when they get to university because often Christianity is attacked or questioned in Philosophy or Psychology classes and if they only have a Sunday School faith they don't have the tools to defend or understand more deeply.

As a church we must be always open to understanding the different context each generation will face and help them face it with fortitude and strength. Social Media bullying was never an issue for us but kids are committing suicide because of it. How do we educate our young people to cope with it? Climate Change is causing all sorts of environmental changes. How do we convince our Gov't to deal with it?

Different contexts require different solutions. The Scriptures are there to guide and instruct us not to follow moral rules but to give us a way of living and witnessing to that same God of love who sent his son to show us how to live and how to love in a world of changing contexts. We are all theologians. We all apply our faith to our context. Theology is not some dry academic pursuit for the Theological College but the means by which we can encounter God more deeply, more richly, more relevantly each and every day. Do you need to know that one day "the lion will lay down with the lamb" or do you need some other word this day? I pray that you might receive it today. AMEN

\*\*\*\*\*