

Tuning Up

(Mark 1: 1-8)

Perhaps some of you have been to a concert of junior violinists whose tuning is far from perfect. If you have attended such a concert you were there for the love of your children or grandchildren, not primarily for the quality of the playing. I want to suggest this morning that Christians and their churches have a tendency to get terribly out of tune and are so to speak like a Suzuki violin class of five-year-olds. This happens when the way we live our lives is not in tune with the notes laid out for us in the gospel. Advent is a season that invites us to tune our Churches so that just as a violin tunes to the pitch A 440 we are in tune with the pitch sounding from the gospel of Jesus Christ.

This morning I would like to emphasize three things as we consider getting in tune.

1. We get out of tune when we allow the secularism that pervades Canadian society influence how we see ourselves as Christians.
2. In such a climate we need to see there are two ways we can choose to be the church.
3. Isaiah 40 can act like the true A to which the violinist tunes the instrument so that as Christians we can resonate not with the culture but the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

1. We get out of tune when we allow the secularism that pervades Canadian society influence how we see ourselves as Christians. By this I mean rather than allowing the Gospel to shape and influence the society the society over-rides the gospel. We have become so apologetic about the claims of Jesus Christ that as a nation we have all but rid public speech of any reference to Jesus. Let me illustrate what I mean.

Christmas is a time when elected and non-elected guardians of cultural tolerance and social justice pronounce on acceptable norms of "multicultural" behaviour. Unfortunately, instead of fostering racial harmony they bruise the spirit of multiculturalism.

In Richmond B.C. there was a debate was over putting a Christmas tree on top of the city hall. A politically correct decision was made. The Christmas tree idea was killed

in the name of multicultural harmony.

Choral singers at the B-C Legislature were advised to avoid songs that mentioned the name of Christ because "Christmas is now a multicultural event. We do not want it to focus on one religion".

Today in Canada political correctness dictates we are no longer free to make any public reference to Jesus. This freedom is slipping away like the gradual shifting of the tuning peg on the violin. It is almost imperceptible. While we are free to associate within our own communities of faith, the music is out of tune because we are seemingly apathetic to how the culture-forming elites" of Canada (the universities, governments, the media, and the courts) see Christian values as worthless, or worse yet, something to be eradicated from our public life.

2. If it is true that we can get out of tune when we allow the secularism that pervades Canadian society influence how we see ourselves as Christians, then secondly we need to see that there are two ways we can choose to be the church. Both of these ways are outlined for us in the Acts of the Apostles.

First of all there is the church in Jerusalem. At Pentecost 3,000 people were added. That is a good start for a new church. But they got out of tune with a debate over how they would fit with Judaism. They had, for the most part, come out of Judaism and were trying to make this new religion as much like Judaism as possible. Compare this to the church in Antioch, the northern city. Here was a church with vision. The church in Antioch decided that it was for the world, and it was going to do something no one had ever done. They were going to send out some people who were to be missionaries and establish new churches: Paul and Barnabas, and then later Paul and Silas. Everywhere Paul went, they were poorly received. They were stoned, beaten, and thrown into prison because they didn't follow the lead of the politically correct mindset of Rome. However, when it was over, the church had been established. Later they went into Europe. When you go to Israel, you cannot find the site of the church in Jerusalem. In Antioch, on the side of a hill, the site of that great church with its altar still stands as a tribute to their vision. They were in tune.

Given how secularism has come to define what it means to be Canadian the tendency of Christians has been to follow the path of least resistance. We try to make the Gospel fit into the secularism that says you can believe what you want so long as you

don't act on it or talk about it. So in order to guard ourselves from playing out of tune like the Jerusalem Christians and taking our cue from the Church in Antioch we need some direction as to how to play in tune.

3. My third point is that Isaiah 40 can act like the true A to which the violinist tunes the instrument so that as Christians we can resonate not with the culture but the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In such a climate as ours Isaiah 40 has a message to speak to us. The writer of this portion of Isaiah was living with the Jewish people some 700 hundred miles away from Jerusalem. They were in Babylon. Babylon was a place where the people were allowed to practice their Jewish faith so long as it didn't challenge the dominant Babylonian culture. Over the course of seventy plus years the people had become so assimilated into Babylonian culture they were no longer in tune with their tradition as found in the Law of Moses. It was while they were playing out of tune that one of their number saw what was happening and said we are taking our cue from the wrong players. He puts it like this at verse 6:

“Cry out!”

And I said, “What shall I cry?”

All people are grass,
their constancy is like the flower of the field.

7 The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.

8 The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand forever.

9 Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
lift it up, do not fear;
say to the cities of Judah,
“Here is your God.

Here is a word that I think speaks to us in a culture where the language of political correctness fills our vocabulary with words that remove those words that define what

we believe as Christians.

Canadians of a certain age remember that when Christianity dominated the country, non-Christian children found themselves singing carols about Jesus in public schools, church-going was mandatory in the armed services, and Sabbath rules made Sunday wretched (in Protestant areas) for the rest of us. Probably most citizens were delighted to see the church lose that kind of power.

But the response to this is not by giving up our voice altogether. Like Isaiah we need to be a people who are crying out in the wilderness, where we don't have the kind of influence we once did. But this can be an opportunity because it allows us to remember that when we are true to God's word, which according to verse 8 will stand forever, we have a message that can and does change lives.

In our ministry we need to constantly find ways to be heralds of good tidings. We can do this through programmes like Alpha, a course that presents the gospel in a clear and life-giving way over eleven evenings and one Saturday. We will be running Alpha again starting January 21st. We can be heralds of good tidings through weekends like Cursillo, where many people experience God's presence in their lives that resonates with the words of comfort that begin Isaiah 40. We show the compassion of God through ministries like Inn From the Cold, where homeless families and singles are shown hospitality by Christians.

I have a vision for us as a parish that we will become a centre where parenting courses are offered, so that we can assist those within our community to become more effective parents.

We can also be heralds of good tidings when we respond to decisions made by lawmakers that affirm the place of a Christian presence and witness in Canada. I have a card I would invite you to sign this morning. Tomorrow I will be sending it along with a thank you letter to the Toronto City Council who last week over-turned a decision by bureaucrats who wanted to call the evergreen in Nathan Phillip's Square a Holiday Tree. The mayor and council rejected this politically correct name. So thankfully there is a Christmas Tree and not a Holiday Tree outside of the Toronto City Hall this year.

We will be evermore heralds of good tidings when as a congregation we increasingly

live out the words with which this morning's passage ends:

10 See, the Lord God comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.

11 He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.

This is a striking image because it brings together power and gentleness. The way God rules is not by dominance and control but through gentle care. Here is the image of a shepherd truly caring for those who are his sheep. As we learn to follow the true pitch of Jesus whose life embodies the words spoken here, we won't respond to secularism through anger, or anti-racism by suggesting that people from other lands should go back to where they came from.

Rather we will be congregations where we are learning to play together by keeping our lives in tune with his life. When this happens we will be a place where people will be attracted to come because our music is in tune with Jesus whose lead puts a song into our hearts that rings forth on key.