

# AGAINST THE ODDS!

Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> December 2016

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 11:1-10



On 5<sup>th</sup> June 1989 a column of tanks rumbled down Beijing's Tiananmen Square. It was early morning. The day before had seen the Chinese military brutally suppress student protests. Deaths were in the hundreds, perhaps as high as one thousand.

Suddenly a young man dressed in a white shirt and dark pants stood in the middle of the wide avenue. Clutching a shopping bag he brought the tanks to a stop. Onlookers couldn't believe their eyes. The lead tank tried to drive around the man but he repeatedly stepped into its path.

Walking down Tiananmen Square some twelve years later brought a shiver to my spine. Here, in this very place, a lowly, anonymous young man stood up to the full force of the Chinese Military - what courage, what tenacity, what defiance!

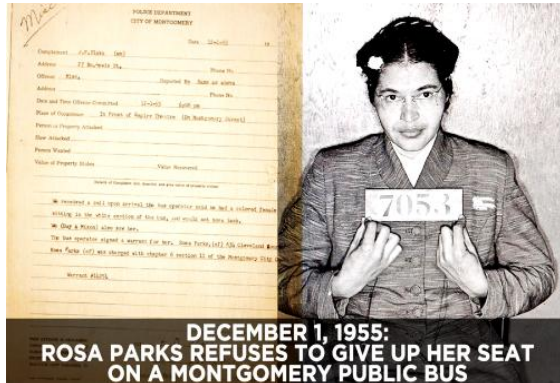
Dictionaries define "defiance" as "*open or bold resistance to an opposing force or authority.*" It concerns being "*daring*" even when facing defeat. Being "defiant" is commonly associated with those who risk their reputations or even their lives by standing up to misinformed public opinion or opposing injustices of many forms.

Mahatma Gandhi looms, perhaps, as one of the most "defiant" characters in history. His famous "salt march" in India, a protest against taxation by British Colonial regime, saw Gandhi stand up to the full force of the British authorities. This act subsequently enabled Indians to assert their rights and to finally claim their independence.

Then there was Rosa Parks who, in 1955, transgressed Alabama's racial segregation laws by refusing to give up her seat to a white person on a bus in the city of Montgomery.

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This led to the development of the civil rights movement and the subsequent dismantling of racial segregation and racial discrimination in the USA.



Here in Australia I remember a fellow by the name of Charlie Perkins who led a group of students from Sydney University on a bus tour through rural NSW. It was 1965 and the purpose of the tour was to draw public attention to the poor state of Aboriginal health, education and housing.

During the course of this controversial tour students encountered Aboriginal people who were routinely barred from clubs, swimming pools and cafes. The students challenged these practices and were able pressure governments and communities to make changes. Charlie Perkins and the student tour itself, was an act of “defiance” because entrenched public attitudes were confronted, they were challenged and were, hopefully, changed.

Now, with these things in mind, I believe Jesus was one of the most “defiant” people in history. Think about it. Jesus challenged the religious practices of his day. He transgressed rigid laws concerning purity and impurity by touching the dead, associating with lepers and allowing a menstruating woman breach strict taboos of the time by touching him.

Jesus healed people on the Sabbath. He mingled with outsiders, people who included tax collectors, prostitutes and the mentally ill. And he chose to identify with the poor, the destitute and the homeless of his place.

Meanwhile, Jesus fraternized with so-called threatening “others”. These included Samaritans and Greeks. Jesus called on people to love their enemies and “to pray for those who persecute you”. Here Jesus confronted that ancient adage: “an eye for an eye” and a “tooth for a tooth” by calling on people to, rather, “turn the other cheek” and “to go the second mile”.

Friends, Jesus was clearly defiant. He satirized the military by riding into Jerusalem on a lowly donkey. He baffled the dictators of the day as he stood before the courts of Herod and Pilate.

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And Jesus enraged the High Priest and his council as he responded to the question *“are you the Messiah”* with the words *“I am.”*

Moreover, Jesus defied the greatest institution of his day, the temple in Jerusalem. He did so as he entered its precincts and overturned the tables of the moneychangers, referring to them as *“a den of robbers.”*



Then Jesus spoke of the temple’s destruction at a time when the place was actually going through a massive refit under Herod the Great. Here Jesus not only spoke about the temple’s destruction (which did happen some seventy years later at the hands of the Romans), Jesus quite audaciously claimed the temple would be raised up again in a radically new way!

The Gospel writers are quick to point out here that Jesus was defiantly speaking about a new “temple”, a place where God would be present to the world – and this would be in the form of his own resurrected body (see John 2:19-22).

Here we see that Jesus actually defies the greatest obstacle of all. Jesus flouts that “end of the road” experience we call death. And he does so as he is executed on a cross as a common criminal only to then go on and conquer that most formidable “dead-end” as he is raised to life on third day. Now that’s defiance in anyone’s terms!

Today we read from the Hebrew scriptures, from the prophet Isaiah. The focus here is on Israel’s predicament as a people living under the threat of neighbouring empires and its humiliation as a vassal state.

Jesse is the father of King David and in such turbulent times the long established royal lineage has been cut off. The much revered dynasty has been severed as the glorious past under a united monarchy, with David himself as king, is long gone. Israel is now weak. Israel is now vulnerable. The people are at risk of utter annihilation.

But Isaiah has got something quite amazing to say. Isaiah speaks about a flicker of life that will spring from this long dead lineage. Isaiah proclaims a green shoot will sprout from this sterile, desolate dynasty. And this “shoot” shall blossom into a reign of justice and peace.

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Here the unjust will reap the consequences of their corrupt, deceptive ways and the righteous shall prosper and live.

Now, to me, this is “defiance” at its very best. In the wake of humiliation and annihilation, the people of Israel are told life will spring forth. A green shoot will sprout and this new growth will offer people a future in a place where there is really no way forward.

And to make the point, Isaiah uses some hyperbole as references are made to the wolf living with the lamb, the leopard lying down with the kid, the calf and the lion being together and a child placing its hand on the adder’s den.

Friends, I believe Isaiah demonstrates a vitally important point here. And that point is this. What God promises and what God sets out to do stands in vast contrast to what the world both sees and understands. Indeed, what God intends and what God calls for sits in direct opposition to what the world values, accepts and holds as the norm.

So Isaiah speaks of a major reversal, indeed the prophet highlights a major upheaval where the laws of the jungle are suspended. Isaiah points to a scenario where the natural food chain is subverted as beasts of prey give up their predatory ways to lie peacefully and gently with their prey.

Indeed, one could say God subverts or at least overturns the status quo. For, when it comes to God’s order of things, public consensus, popular opinion and a majority vote really do not count.

In ancient Israel’s experience this came in the form of a promise, a commitment that, in the midst of all their woes and troubles, God would act to give the people life and a future. And that new life, that future comes to fruition, we believe, in the birth of Jesus, the Messiah or the Christ.

Friends, at the heart of Isaiah’s message there are acts of defiance. For, Isaiah proclaims God will defy the odds by offering life where there is only death and decay. Isaiah affirms that God will flout established systems and contravene likely historical outcomes by presenting the people of Israel with a future where the only option appears to be one of humiliation and defeat.

And this is takes us to the heart of the Gospel. For, the Good News that we proclaim is centred around profound acts of defiance. Think about it.

The first Christians highlighted this when they by-passed strict rules concerning dietary regulations and the practice of circumcision. This took place as they reached out to, and included, Gentiles or non-Jews in their community.

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Indeed, the first Christians highlighted this when they proclaimed Jesus as the “Son of God”. This directly contravened the Roman edict that confirmed this title on the emperor and on the emperor alone.

And we witness this kind of defiance all through history. The parliamentary reformer and great Christian, William Wilberforce, defied entrenched economic interests and powerful business lobbyists of his time to bring about legislation abolishing the slave trade.

The theologian and outstanding church leader, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, defied the German Church and its accommodation with National Socialism by supporting the Confessing Church. Meanwhile our own home-grown Australian, the Josephite nun, Sister Mary MacKillop, defied the powers of her own church and those of the wider community by establishing a network of schools to educate the poor.

In my own work prior to serving here in West Epping, I witnessed defiance in many forms. I particularly remember the year 2000 when, on Christmas Eve, some 29 churches were bombed in Jakarta by groups linked to Al Qaeda. The following years were brutal ones across the Indonesian archipelago with the burning, looting, rape and beheading of Christians and Muslims.

Then on Christmas Eve 2005 things came to a head. Christians, who were gathering for evening services, came under real threat as churches were to be once again bombed. In response to this menace some 17,000 police and security personnel were deployed across the City of Jakarta as many Christians ignored extremist ultimatums.

And then a remarkable thing happened. A number of local Muslim organisations banded together. Some 7,000 members went on to gather outside Jakarta’s churches in an act of defiance against Islamist extremists and as a demonstration of solidarity with their Christian brothers and sisters. And because of this Indonesia’s celebration of Christmas was not, and could not, be shut down!

Brothers and sisters in Christ, defiance stands at the heart of Christian discipleship. We see in Jesus and we observe it in the life and witness of so many people!

For, as Isaiah proclaims so many years ago, God has a habit of going against the grain, God demonstrates a commitment to standing up against the odds and bringing into being that which is unexpected, unexplained, seemingly impossible and radically new!



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*“A shoot will come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.”*  
And, *“the wolf shall live with lamb”, “the leopard shall lie down with the kid”, “the cow and the bear shall graze”, “the nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp. And “the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den”.*

What are the things your faith tells you to be defiant about as you prepare for Christmas?

And where do you see God being defiant in the world today?

To be defiant, we don’t have to stand in front of a monster tank in Beijing. Neither do we have to rally in Jakarta to prevent the bombing of churches. But, in our own quiet, sincere, routine ways, God calls us to stand firm against those things that threaten. God beckons us to defy those things that intimidate, undermine, dehumanise or reduce us and the people around us to anything less than what God creates God’s people to be.

And, friends, this is God’s Word for us today. There are no simple answers and there are no easy ways out. But be assured, in world where darkness and death get far too much exposure, God promises us that green shoots will sprout. God assures us that light will appear. God pledges us that life will abound.

So, friends, as you prepare for Christmas, be defiant. Defy the odds - and in doing so, discover what life is really meant to be!

Amen.



John Barr