

## Sermon

*Aim: the story of the Eureka Stockade challenges us to hear Christ's call to "wake up" and "be ready"; living under the banner of his Cross and looking for his coming among us in glory and in judgment.*

The battle of the Eureka Stockade took place near Ballarat on 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Advent 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1854. It involved about 150 miners and nearly 300 men from the armed forces and police. It is the most famous battle ever fought on Australian soil.

When Gough Whitlam unveiled the restored Eureka Flag in 1975 he said, ***"It is a truism, perhaps, that the importance of an historical event lies not in what happened but in what later generations believe to have happened."***

Mark Twain said, ***"It was a revolution - small in size, but great politically; it was a strike for liberty, a struggle for principle, a stand against injustice and oppression."***

Contemporary English historian Paul Johnson writes condescendingly, ***"It is a reflection of Australia's happy and largely uneventful history that this picturesque but trivial episode has to be raised to the status of a major event."***

## **But what did take place? And then, why should what took place become part of a sermon?**

During 1852 and 1853 tens of thousands of gold-diggers had poured onto the Victorian goldfields seeking their fortunes. The Victorian Government had been quick to enforce a licence and tax them 30 shillings a month, but slow to acknowledge their rights.

[The battle was provoked by the Victorian Government's refusal to acknowledge the rights of gold prospectors and miners. The miners were

- ❖ forced to pay for the right to work on the goldfields,
- ❖ they had been given no voting rights,
- ❖ no parliamentary representation,
- ❖ no right to buy their land.

A police officer or magistrate could demand to see the licence at any time and often they brought the men up from their work underground just to inspect the licence.]

Tensions were rising on the 6<sup>th</sup> October 1854 when James Scobie was kicked to death in the back streets of Ballarat.

James Bentley, the publican of the Eureka Hotel, was tried for the murder but the charges were dropped.

The outraged miners called a public meeting on 17<sup>th</sup>

October, which degenerated into a riot the Eureka Hotel was burnt to the ground.

On November 11<sup>th</sup> at Bakery Hill a charter of democratic rights was worked out and the Ballarat Reform League was founded. They particularly wanted the abolition of the Miner's Licence. When the Governor, Sir Charles Hotham, refused to even meet them tensions ran high.

There was an inflammable cocktail of anger and alcohol, hot westerly winds, hard work, but little gold. Skirmishes with police increased and the miners decided to defend themselves by building a stockade.

The military and the police attacked the stockade at dawn on the Sunday morning - Advent Sunday - on the 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1854. The battle lasted only fifteen minutes. Twenty-four gold-diggers were killed and many others wounded. Six government officers died.

What happened then is interesting. Within days most miners had quietly returned to work; 114 had been arrested, most were not convicted, Judge Redmond Barry treated them with respect. There was a Royal Commission and most of the miners' grievances were remedied. Their demands for political representation were conceded and within a year the rebel leader – Peter Lalor – had become a Member of Parliament.

But the Eureka Stockade took on a life of its own and came to be seen as a turning point in the history of

Australia.

Henry Lawson's Ballad "*Eureka*" tells the way in which these men came to be regarded:

*But not in vain those diggers died, Their comrades may rejoice  
For o'er the voice of tyranny is heard the people's voice;  
It says, "Reform your rotten law, the diggers wrongs make right  
Or else with them, our brothers now, we'll gather to the fight" ...  
And like such men may we be found, with leaders such as they,  
In the roll-up of Australians on our darkest, grandest day!*

The readings in this season of Advent tell us that the coming and presence of Jesus is a turning point. No one puts it more clearly than Matthew. This baby is a King and whether he's a child in a manger, a teacher coming into Jerusalem on a donkey, or nailed to a cross, or coming again in glory; he is the King. Jesus was born a King [*pace* Dorothy Sayers "*The Man born to be King*"]

He is the One in charge and people had better behave like they would do when a good King is around.

Peter Lalor was the leader of the miners at Eureka. He was never a king but Peter Lalor brought the miners to that point when they had to make a choice. Were they going to lie down and be trampled on by the forces of darkness, or would they wake up, stand up and be counted?

This is what St Paul says, "Time is running out. Wake

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Advent. Year A. 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2007

up.” And then he goes on, “Let the Lord Jesus Christ take control of you.” In other words; if Jesus really is the King, let him do what kings do and rule in your life. “Don’t go to sleep on the job – there’s a battle to be fought and won.”

Jesus is saying the same thing. His presence always reminds people that there is a choice to be made – now. The choice is this, do I live with Jesus as king or am I the king in my life? Do I live selfishly – or do I live for the glory of God?

We might think everything is ordinary [like in the days of Noah] we might not bother to prepare. But Jesus says that we are in danger. The police and troops are gathering round the stockade and we have to make a choice. Do we live under the powers of darkness, oppression and injustice – or do we live by the power of God and in the light of Jesus Christ?

When the miners made their stand they did so under a flag they called the "Southern Cross". It was a white cross on a dark blue background with a star at the centre and a star at the end of each of the four arms on the cross.

The flag was raised and 500 diggers knelt around it. Peter Lalor raised his right hand and said, "*We swear by the Southern Cross to stand truly by each other, and fight to defend our rights and liberties.*" They all replied, "Amen".

[Even Manning Clark in his *History of Australia* describes this event in religious terms.]

As Christians we take our stand beneath the cross of Jesus Christ. Matthew tells us that Jesus was King on that cross. Above Jesus was nailed the words “This man is the King of the Jews”. They might have got it wrong – he is king of the whole world – but he is King.

- ❖ In baptism we received the sign of the cross.
- ❖ We celebrate Holy Communion today as a sign of Christ's body given up and his blood shed for us on the cross.
- ❖ We march beneath the banner of his cross.

When the militia attacked the Eureka Stockade their object was to tear down the flag, the Southern Cross.

But the person of Jesus and his cross can never be torn down. Jesus stands above history; over all the world the cross is a sign that Jesus has defeated the power of evil, that God's love is victorious, that we live on the side of victory.

**The tragedy of Eureka** was the arrogance of Sir Charles Hotham and the corrupt establishment of the Victorian Government who wanted to "teach the diggers a lesson"; and the diggers who believed that riot and disorder was the best way to overcome that arrogant and corrupt government. The result was that good men on both sides died.

**The triumph of Eureka** is that in the long run people reclaimed the conviction that change must be brought about "peaceably, constitutionally and by moral force alone."

Jesus knew that the love of God can never be imposed upon people by force. We must choose.

But Jesus also warns people that they are accountable, that a time of crisis or judgement is coming. When? He cannot say. But it will be like a thief in the night.

Peter Lalor knew that whatever else was going on the men of Eureka needed to be rallied and to "wake up".

Jesus and St Paul knew exactly the same.

We need to wake-up to ourselves. What am I doing with my life? How do I stand against oppression and violence. But more important how am I living in the presence of my King?

The warning is that we can all too easily become slack in our life and attitudes. We can cease to live as if the Master – the King – is present. We can abuse others by our uncontrolled anger, our thoughtless words, our hurt pride, or our exercise of power.

St Paul tells us to "Let the Lord Jesus take control of you, and don't think of ways to indulge your evil desires". For our sakes Jesus laid aside all the power, prestige, status and security and took the form of a servant - there as a weak and vulnerable man he died,

surrendering his life as they nailed him to the cross. But in that act by the mighty power of God working through his weakness he broke the powers of darkness and set the captives free.

Jesus does not enter into competition with our power and determination. His cross was a display of apparent weakness but from that compelling place of weakness, with outstretched arms he invites us to hand over all our idols - all that we trust in which is not from God - and lies just in ourselves. And then to walk out free to love and serve him in all we do.

*Prayer:*

Gracious and loving God;  
through the death of Jesus your Son on the Cross  
you have given us a flag to fly  
and a banner to march under.

Make us ready so to look for Jesus and to live for him  
That his freedom and love is seen in us  
and his glory is revealed for others to see. Amen.

**References:**

*Great events in Australia's History* Bruce Elder Compiling Editor  
Manning Clark's *History of Australia*  
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Henry Lawson's *Collected Writings*.  
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The Venerable Ian Palmer

Sunday, 2 December 2007

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