

A Sermon for the Last Sunday after the Epiphany

The Church of the Transfiguration, New York

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As I pondered this final sermon at Transfiguration after 11 years almost to the day among you, I kept coming up with favorite texts from the New Testament, texts which indicate my particular theological bent.

Perhaps I will begin at the beginning. My adult faith came to birth through the preaching of a distinguished Presbyterian professor of Old Testament at a Student Christian Movement Mission at the University of Melbourne in 1962. Dr McCaughey based his address on John 1: “And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” I had been raised as a church going Christian in the Anglican tradition; I had been a choir boy, Sunday School teacher, and acolyte; and I enjoyed the church and its associated life. However looking back my faith was not particularly deep and had never really been challenged. But it was that mission address which led to a new and deeper understanding of the divinity of Christ. Jesus, with whom I was familiar through his life and teaching as outlined in the gospels, became in that moment so much more than a good man, a good teacher, a prophetic figure; he was none other than God incarnate: Emmanuel, God with us.

Over the years as I journeyed towards ordination, the implications of that extraordinary statement in John’s gospel, “and the Word was made flesh” began to dawn on me. Somewhere along the way I studied St Paul’s Letter to the Colossians and especially chapter 1: 15-21 in which we find these words: “And in him (Jesus) all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.” Jesus the Incarnate One, brings about God’s great redemptive or reconciling work, a work which embraces “all things”. In other words nothing is left out of God’s redemptive work, God’s Saving Love. The implications of “all things” are stupendous. The original Greek of “all things” is “ta panta”, which translates as “the totality of all that is”. Nothing is left out and no one is left out. God’s Saving Love embraces the totality of God’s creation

including God's human creation. The implications of that inclusive phrase "all things" for our human interactions and our relationship with the created world let alone how we view ourselves are enormous and form part of our baptismal covenant. "Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?" and "Will you strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being?"

Another text which has been dear to me for a long time also comes from John's Gospel in the Good Shepherd chapter 10: "I came that you may have life, and have it abundantly." Fullness of life; life fully lived to the glory of God; abundant life; that is at the heart of the gospel of Jesus. I thank God that the Christianity in which I was raised, in which I was educated and eventually formed as a priest was of a generous, positive and loving kind. I know many people who have suffered through a rather narrow, negative type of Christianity full of don'ts and dominated by the fear of God's judgment and punishment. In Australian Christianity that style was promoted by Irish Roman Catholics, by Anglican Evangelicals from Sydney and by other Protestant denominations. Such an approach was not conducive to a love of self; it certainly undermined a positive view of one's sexuality; and often led to a dualistic view of the body.

But the Jesus of the Gospels is not a negative nay-sayer but a man who embraced all comers; who dined with tax-collectors and sinners; who reached out to the poor and needy; and who was not afraid of close relationships with men and women. Jesus came that we might have life and have it abundantly.

I also am thankful for the fact that I have been formed in a Christian faith which is not overly dogmatic. In other words I was raised as a classic Anglican with its understanding that our faith rests on the three-legged stool of "Scripture, Tradition and Reason". This is the Anglicanism of the Elizabethan Settlement, of Richard Hooker, of the Caroline Divines, of Michael Ramsay and Rowan Williams and many more. Scripture is always read in the context of Tradition (that is how those scriptures have been interpreted in the life of the Church) and through the eyes of Reason. To ignore the Tradition of the Church is to ignore the living context of Scripture. We forget so often that Scripture does not drop down from the sky but itself is the work of living faith communities. Human reason, that God given ability to think and reflect and comment, is what we bring to bear as we strive to interpret

and apply Holy Scripture. And the text that has come to mean much to me and undergirds that Anglican approach is from John 16: “When the Spirit of Truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth.” That sentence encapsulates for me the understanding that “we don’t know it all”; “we don’t have all the answers”; “there is always more to learn”; “God has surprises in store for us”; “there is a place for a healthy agnosticism on some issues.” All of us are facing issues related to life and death; of changing understanding of sexuality and gender; of new insights into our relationships to other faith traditions; and many more. There is not one simple answer to the questions raised on these and many other issues. But we do believe that the Spirit of our God and his Christ is a Spirit of Truth which leads us into all Truth.

And that leads me to St Paul, the premier Christian theologian and the great chapter 13 of First Corinthians. Some of you may remember the death 7 years ago of my sister in law whose marriage to my brother I had celebrated here at Transfiguration in 2007. At the time my Mexican friend comforted me by saying “don’t worry about Louise” for she is “cara a cara con Dios”, face to face with God. That famous verse from 1 Corinthians 13 came alive for me: “Now we see in mirror dimly but then we shall see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.” Paul was well aware of the dimness of the mirror (now we see through a glass darkly); we all know that dim mirror, of all the things we experience, innocent suffering, the disappointments and lack of fulfilment, the things we fear and about which we are anxious, the death of loved ones. At time the mirror seems very dark and dim. And Paul knew all that in his own life and ministry as I have in mine and I am sure you have in yours. But Paul knew, as you and I know that God has so much more in store for us. “Now we see in a mirror dimly” he says “but then we shall see face to face.” Paul knew deep down that his and our destination is heaven itself where will be face to face with God in glory.

And finally Glory. Today we have the Transfiguration gospel on this Last Sunday after Epiphany which comes just before the beginning of Lent on Ash Wednesday. There Peter, James and John behold Jesus in Glory accompanied by Moses and Elijah. When Peter tried to hold on to the moment the cloud descends and the voice said “This is my Son the Beloved listen to him” and “they were left with Jesus alone” who led them down the mountain to continue the journey to Jerusalem, to

his Passion and Death and Resurrection. It is there that God's glory is fully revealed in the face to the Crucified One; it is there they see God's Glorious Love in action. I am very honored today that our friend, Brian Schober has composed an anthem for my final Sunday based on a favorite hymn text from the ancient Liturgy of St James. I have always loved those words "From glory to glory advancing, we praise thee O Lord." From Glory to Glory: we were made gloriously by the creator God; we have been redeemed gloriously by the Blood of Jesus; and we have been called to Glory, to be face to face with our God.

But I have one last thing to say to you dear parishioners and friends of this great parish. And here I quote another favorite text from the Letter to the Ephesians: "I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all."

"Maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace". That is my parting word to you all. Because that is what is ultimately at the heart of our faith in the God who reconciles all things in and through his Christ. I know times of transition can be testing and unsettling. But that is precisely when we all need to commit ourselves wholeheartedly to maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

God bless you all and God Bless the Church of the Transfiguration. Amen