

Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

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Rector of St James

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

'Set Free'

25 August 2019

Readings: Jeremiah 1: 4-10; Psalm 71: 1-6;
Hebrews 12: 18-29; Luke 13: 10-17.

The Christian faith is about change and transformation, both of the individual and the wider society. Of course, this transformation is for the common good so that we may fix what is wrong with the world. Nevertheless, there is a paradox here that our post-modern world struggles to understand.

The purpose of religion, indeed its definition, is to bind people both to God and each other in the context of a community. To do this there needs to be a common belief or system of meaning that shapes both the individual and the community. Nevertheless, we struggle to find that commonality in a world of fragmentation and self-interest. But is this a reason not to try?

Journey, Hospitality and Refuge

Next year a group of St James' parishioners will go on a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela in Spain. A pilgrim is a person who walks to a special place with a religious purpose, and the hope for members of such a group is that the experience will be transforming.

During this past year, the St James' Institute conducted two events that have touched on the Camino, or the way to Compostela. First was the conversation between Ailsa Piper and Monsignor Tony Doherty and the second was the Patronal Talk by Dan Mullins. Both speakers talked about the nature of pilgrimage through their personal experiences and reflections.

Ailsa shared her story through the book she wrote about the Camino titled *Sinning Across Spain*. It was inspired by the medieval tradition of paying pilgrims to walk on behalf of another who literally carried their sins on paper or in the memory to the holy place, there to seek absolution. Ailsa collected lists of sins from people to take with her, including many of the traditional ones such as anger, envy, violence, pride and lust. In this symbolic way she carried the burdens of others on pilgrimage.

Dan had a different story to tell because he is a singer and songwriter. He carried his guitar and sang for his supper as he went. He wrote songs and performed them in return for the hospitality of innkeepers and other pilgrims.

Both Ailsa and Dan discovered an experience of community and spirituality on the journey that lifted them up from the mundane to the mystical. Such mystery and paradox is present in the words attributed to St Francis of Assisi: 'It is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it's in dying that we are born to eternal life'.

It is these things that pilgrims often discover through their experiences on the road. I think Dan got it right when he said of the pilgrims: "A few people have pious reasons to walk, but most are simply looking for something, never being quite sure what it is but knowing it when it is found".

Pilgrimage is a transforming experience and it is for this reason that we describe the spiritual life as a journey. Rather than focussing on ideas and dogmas that tend to divide humanity and create conflict, the pilgrim looks to the journey and the goal at the end, while at the same time being bound with the other pilgrims in a common humanity.

What binds the pilgrims is the looking forward to the future goal rather than where they have come from. This is an act of true religion and good faith focussed on future hope rather than past failure. Moreover, together people give and receive hospitality while finding refuge either in the silence, or in each other, or in the physical places visited along the way.

The Spirit Rather than the Letter of the Law

The Epistle of James states that 'Religion that is pure and undefiled before God... is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world' (James 1:27). That is to say, true religion is about putting love into action by being concerned for the wellbeing of others, while also refraining from actions that cause harm.

The Gospel reading demonstrates this. It describes a crippled woman who came to a synagogue where Jesus was teaching on the Sabbath, and he had compassion on her and healed her. Jesus' miracles are used in the Gospels as signs of what God's world is like – a place where those things that are wrong are made right, and where broken things are made whole. The woman was restored and immediately began to praise God.

Yet the story tells us that not all praised God or were happy about this act of compassion. The synagogue leader is described as being indignant that this happened on the Sabbath and argued that it should have been done on some other day. The synagogue leader was more concerned with the letter of the law than the spirit of the law; he was more interested in power and control than in good relationships and the wellbeing of the crippled woman. Jesus called him a hypocrite.

In Matthew's Gospel, however, Jesus is described as having said that he came to fulfil the Law rather than abolish it. It may therefore seem incongruous that he seemingly broke the Law in today's reading from Luke's Gospel. Apart from the particular interests of the gospel writers, there may be another reason for this contradiction. Part of the solution is to understand that the nature and essence of the Torah (or ancient Jewish Law) was to describe a way of life rather than a set of rules and regulations. In other words, it is descriptive rather than prescriptive.

As is so often the case when dealing with ancient texts, we can be inclined to read back into them our own situation in life. The Torah in ancient times, however, seems to have been principally concerned with people living a virtuous life that reflected God's nature. So, when Jesus sought to fulfil the Law, he was seeking to fully reflect the nature of God in his humanity, not simply 'keep the rules'.

There is a message in this; and the message is beware of those who have more interest in rules, regulations and law than the common good. In spiritual direction there is a simple test for the discernment of spirits and that is, if you observe motivations that are principally based on power, control and status then it is probably not of God. Godliness, on the other hand, is reflected in acts of grace, hospitality, thankfulness and wholeness. It is this that we are called to pursue as pilgrims; thereby reflecting the nature of God in our humanity.

Praise and Thanksgiving

As I said in the introduction, by definition, religion is that which seeks to binds us to God and to each other. Of course, we can be 'bound' in both good and bad ways. Sometimes the bonds are chains of slavery.

In this respect, bad faith and bad religion can bind us to false gods and idols that draw us away from the true God. Idols are usually things that come from out of own personalities and desires, and they create brokenness in our relationships because they are connected to our desire for power over others. They are called sins and are aptly described in the Ten Commandments; and I paraphrase them as follows:

- putting human distractions and desires before God,
- treating the things of God with contempt,
- treating people badly when they are in need,
- being arrogant and self-centred,
- not respecting your closest relationships with family and friends,
- being violent, abusive, and bullying, or
- stealing, lying and gossiping about other people.

False religion will help us to justify any, and all, of these things, but as Jesus said: 'It is not to be so among you'.

On the other hand, the crippled woman was an innocent person who was set free from that which had bound her in an unhealthy way, in this case a physical ailment. It reminds us that the sign of the Kingdom of God is freedom from that which stops us from becoming the people that God wants us to be. The message of Christ is that we need not be bound by that which is destructive in our lives. Instead, we can be set free and transformed through a process of becoming bound to that which is life giving.

Jesus raised the question ‘What is the Sabbath for?’ and the answer was for the worship of God (which includes healing, forgiveness and renewal), and the crowd rejoiced. Only the power brokers went away grumbling. This worship in which we share today is a metaphor for the end of our pilgrimage, which is to arrive at the place where we can be in communion with God through praise and thanksgiving.