

Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

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Rector of St James

Second Sunday of Easter

19 April 2020

“Behold the Lamb of God, that takes away the sin of the world”

Readings: Acts 2: 14a, 22-32; Psalm 16;
1 Peter 1: 1-12; John 20: 19-31.

Stress Test

Please use your imagination. The scene is a bush track in the Blue Mountains near Lithgow. It was the middle of winter; cold, wet and overcast, with a light breeze. Eight Army Staff Cadets were trudging along the muddy road carrying heavy logs. They had not slept for 24 hours, they were hungry, they were dejected, their heads were down and backs bent under the burden of their loads. It was not difficult to perceive the frustration and misery that festered under the surface of their blank and pale faces.

Time was running out and they were failing to achieve their allotted task. The leader of the team berated them for not trying hard enough, but mutiny was in the wind and the group held back from performing their best. There was a halt in the march, and one of the cadets turned to me and blurted out: “This is barstardisation! Why are we doing this? What are we learning? We are not achieving anything!”

It was Exercise Timor at the Royal Military College, Duntroon; an activity designed to put the cadets under stress, and which in turn would help test their knowledge, skills and attitudes, while also helping them individually to understand their strengths and weaknesses in times of hardship. In short, it tested their spirits in the face of adversity and vulnerability.

I took pity on the cadet who complained and gave him a tip: “The secret to surviving this exercise and the achievement of its tasks is to work together as a team and not as a group of self-interested individuals who only want to ‘perform well’ when they think they are being assessed as the team leader.” He looked blankly at me as if I was speaking gibberish, picked up his log, bent his back, and the ordeal began again.

A principle in leadership training is that we can only lead people as far as we have journeyed ourselves. Moreover, it requires discipline to stick to the task in hand; honesty with oneself and others concerning one’s abilities; transparency regarding the processes employed; and a desire for the common good that includes moral authority, integrity and justice. But I digress.

Death and Resurrection

As our Holy Week preacher Mother Catherine Eaton said: we and the world in which we live is vulnerable. We might think we can control our circumstances, but the reality is that we have little influence apart from exercising good intentions and pursuing healthy relationships. The COVID-19 virus has once more reminded us of this inconvenient human truth.

Following the death of Jesus, the disciples went into hiding lest they too be lynched by the mob that had killed their leader. Having given up their jobs to follow Jesus they had no wealth or status. In the eyes of the authorities they were outsiders – Galileans on the one hand and heretics on the other. They were therefore living in a state of ambiguity and confusion as they met on that evening of the Day of Resurrection.

Sure, they knew the tomb was empty and that Mary Magdalene had claimed to have seen him - but she was a woman, and in those days considered an unreliable witness. Which brings us to today's gospel reading and the description of the resurrected Christ encountering the disciples. "Peace be with you" he said and commissioned them to continue his ministry on earth "As the Father has sent me, so I send you" and he breathed the Holy Spirit into them.

You may note that his words "Receive the Holy Spirit" and "Whose sins you forgive are forgiven; whose sins you retain are retained" are part of the liturgy of the ordination of priests. The idea of the disciples continuing the work of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit remains with us today, but it doesn't mean that either the disciples then or the clergy today have all the answers, never do wrong, or are without spiritual doubt.

To be sure, at this point many people find resonance with the disciple Thomas and his desire for evidence. Yet we, today, do not receive the evidence that Thomas received; instead we are part of that group "who have not seen and yet have come to believe". We are a people in a process of transformation – both coming to believe and becoming the people that God wants us to be.

Putting our faith in materiality, or in knowledge about the world, or being in control of our circumstances, is an illusion – a chimera that is continually beyond us and never quite achieved. Being aware of our limits and brokenness, we may be like the mutinous cadet asking, "why are we doing this?". In reality, we tend to grope around in the spiritual fog of unknowing rather than stride with the certainty of command.

So here is a spiritual tip: abandon the egotistical desires for wealth, power and control over others, and the accumulation of information about God and his attributes. Instead, seek good relationships with God, creation and each other that lead to reconciliation, transformation and peace. This is the work of the disciple – the one who willingly takes up the burden of the cross to follow Jesus.

The Day of Atonement

On 28 September this year, our Jewish brothers and sisters will commemorate *Yom Kippur*, otherwise known as ‘the Day of Atonement’. It is a solemn day of fasting and prayer by which people, both individually and as a community, seek to turn back to God so that they may be reconciled and live in peace; that is, both with God and each other.

It is the most holy day in the Jewish calendar and the services are centred on the synagogue where crowds of people gather to pray. The origins of *Yom Kippur*, however, are found in the Hebrew scriptures - described in the book Leviticus. The ceremony involved a series of sacrifices to atone for the sins of the priests and the community, culminating in the liturgy of the scapegoat. In this way the Hebrew people affirmed their covenant with God and restored their relationship.

The scapegoat sacrifice required a live goat to be brought to the priest, who placed his hands on it and confessed the sins of the people to God. The goat was then driven out into the wilderness taking the sins of the people with it, where it was finally set free. The image of the scapegoat is captured in our Eucharistic liturgy in the words of John the Baptist called the *Agnus Dei* ‘O Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us’.

Reference to atonement (or reconciliation) can be found in many parts of the Hebrew scriptures. In contrast, there are only a few references to it in the New Testament, principally in the Letter to the Hebrews but also in the Letter to the Romans. This may be because in the Old Testament, atonement was principally a practice or liturgy, whereas in the New Testament it started to become an idea or theology.

The New Testament presents Jesus’ death as an atoning sacrifice for the sins of the people, and the Letter to the Hebrews is a dissertation on that topic. It describes how the death of Jesus is the ultimate sacrifice, bringing an end to the need for ongoing sacrifices in the temple. From this has developed a range of theological positions on the idea of atonement and the purpose of Jesus’ death and resurrection. I know of at least eight atonement theologies, and I am sure that there are many more! Nevertheless, I think that something has been lost in such theologising, once it is remembered that atonement was originally a practice or liturgy in which people participated.

The Lamb of God

At the beginning of John’s Gospel, John the Baptist proclaimed: “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”, indeed “the one who baptises with the Holy Spirit”. The Gospel then goes on to develop this message culminating in Jesus handing on the same Spirit to his disciples. We remain in this tradition of Jesus’ disciples today.

In this act of worship, which we call Eucharist (or thanksgiving), we restore something of the ancient liturgy of Atonement. The words and actions link us not only to the actions of Jesus at the Last Supper, as well as the cross of Good Friday, and on to the empty tomb; but it also takes us back to the story of God's people starting with Creation, and on to the Exodus and the Covenant at Sinai, and then the Day of Atonement. This is a liturgy in which we participate, even if 'virtually' in our current circumstances.

We participate in Atonement by participating in the work of Christ – the scapegoat, who was crucified by humanity but restored to new life by God. We too receive the Holy Spirit; we too are transformed by spiritual resurrection in this world; we too may live in peace with God, each other and the world through reconciliation. For we affirm these things every time we celebrate the mystery of Eucharist; when the Word is spoken, the prayers are offered, the cup is shared, and bread is broken.