

‘spiritual agility’
a sermon preached on the
third sunday in advent
17 December 2017
at
st john’s
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
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the lections: Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11; Psalm 126; I Thessalonians 5: 12-28; John 1: 6-8, 19-28

We often hear about the success of the more conservative expressions of Christian faith. Even in our own church in this country many of our sisters and brothers north of the border want to promote their understanding of the Christian message as the only legitimate expression of discipleship and church life. Those of us who see ourselves in either the broad church category or belonging to a progressive understanding of Christianity would want ‘open mindedness’ to be the norm of discipleship and life in the church. Next year in Lent we will have the chance to participate in a series of seminars and address that will require us to look again at the Gospel according to Mark, having an open mind will be needed as we think about what is fundamental to our belief in Christ the messiah. By way of preparation let us this morning consider what is meant by talking about being open-minded.

Being ‘open minded’ can call up visions of an ivory tower detachment impartially withholding judgment until all the evidence is in. ‘Open minded’ may seem synonymous with ‘non-committal’ can even suggest a lazy unwillingness to wrestle with real life issues, a fence sitting cowardice that refuses to choose, to make up its mind, or take action.

Christian discipleship calls for the exact opposite, demands a heart-soul-mind love of God with all that we have and all that we are, a strenuous discipline that keeps on trying to love our neighbours as ourselves. Like marriage, baptism celebrates a better-for-worse determination to keep on belonging together no matter what, when we succeed and when we fail, when life dishes out more than we can take, when the causes for which we work shrivel and die, when the institutions that have shaped us change out from under us or are imperilled by hostile take-overs or they become corrupt. Christian discipleship demands faith that God is for us, whatever else may be against us; conviction that sticking with God is worth immeasurably more than preserving our very lives. What—we may ask—does open mindedness have to do with that?

Everything! Is what I want to say—Everything! Yet ‘spiritual flexibility’ may be a better label for what I have in mind. Most of us have seen those ‘trick’ pictures—look one we see a vase—then suddenly two faces in profile; one way, we see a duck then suddenly a rabbit; one way the cube is coming out at us, the other way it is receding away from us. There is a technical explanation of this—it is called ‘figure ground shifting’; the pictures themselves are indeterminate; what we see is a function of the mind set that we bring.

All four gospels emphasise that Christian discipleship calls us to cultivate a capacity for figure ground shifting. They insist that this is important and not just for tidying up peripheral details: personal flexibility for figure ground shifting is the key to our grasping and being ever more grasped by those essential core convictions on which we stake our very lives. All four gospels give us to understand that both the religious establishment [scribes and Pharisees] and the disciples all begin with faith. Both groups include highly committed individuals who take seriously and try to live into God’s claim to be the organising principle of their lives. All four gospels tell the tragic tale, of how the Scribes and the Pharisees incapacity for figure ground shifting prevented them from recognising Jesus for what He was and Who He is, and so kept them from enjoying the fulfilment of their hopes when He came.

All four gospels are training manuals, spiritual exercise books to limber us up, give us practice in figure ground shifting. ‘Who is Jesus?’ is their question, and they begin by giving the reader an answer. Remember from last week Mark opens his gospel with: ‘The gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God’. Right from the start, John’s gospel is more poetic: Jesus is the Word Who was with God in the beginning, the Word through Whom all things were made, the only begotten Son ever at the Father’s side. All four gospels take their aim at the religiously informed reader. We are supposed to know our Hebrew bibles, even the then current-Jewish theological expectations about how God would redeem Israel: how God’s pledge of everlasting dynasty to David turned into the hope for a Messiah King who would establish peace with justice, once and for all; how Elijah’s fiery chariot exit evolved into the belief that God’s final rescue would be heralded by Elijah’s return; how several centuries without prophecy made the people hunger and thirst for that promised prophet like unto Moses, for that intermediary who would have received the commandments directly from God and who would teach us how to walk in his ways.

All four Gospels expect us to have these and many other images and plot lines already in mind. What the gospels demand is that—having ‘read, marked, learned and inwardly digested them’ – that we then loosen our grip, allow them to float, to bounce against one another, to be interpreted and re-interpreted by the person of Jesus as by our own experience of life. Even etymology will tell us, that the primary purpose of the Gospels is evangelical; not a narrowly focused attention on expanding our store of rote head-knowledge or to swell the size of our systematic theology books, but the gospels are bent on provoking us into whole-self conversions, on figure ground shifting us into a more intimate appreciation with, Who God is and how God loves!

Figure ground shifting is necessary for us, because God’s ways are higher than ours. Instead the scribes and Pharisees responded by vice gripping what they had already understood of Divine revelation, by using their theological knowledge to create a checklist of necessary conditions that anyone would have to meet to qualify as God’s special agent. Sadly, their accent was on the negative, on ruling candidates out. Who did John think he was baptising, if he was not the Christ, Elijah, or a Moses replacement? Surely, the One who is to come wouldn’t be Jesus because no good can come out of Nazareth; because Messiah should be born in Bethlehem, or like Melchizedek come out of nowhere without lineage or genealogy; because the Bible schedules no prophet to come out of Galilee. Must not be Jesus when he works on the Sabbath! Definitely not Jesus, who blasphemes by making himself equal with God! Better put an end to Jesus by getting the Romans to crucify him. Deuteronomy lays it all down—‘Cursed is he’—cut off from God and God’s people—‘who hangs from the tree’. How better to prove to all and sundry that Jesus is not the Messiah of God?

Figure ground shifting is necessary for us, because God is a figure ground shifter. The central thrust of John’s gospel is to mess us and our theological ideas around until we get figure ground shifted into people who can experience the cross, not as degrading failure or shameful tragedy, not just as a necessary evil to solve the sin-problem, but as the hour of Jesus’ glory. The evangelist tells stories, one episode after another in which who Jesus is and what Jesus does clashes and crashes through in unaccustomed ways of being in the world. Repeatedly, encounters with Jesus destabilise people’s sense of who they are and what God wants with them—sets them almost staggering between contrary and conflicting interpretation.

For all four Gospels, faith that enters into hope fulfilled depends on repeated whole self-exercises of imagination. The Good news is that Jesus is Elijah who ascends and returns to breathe us full of Holy Spirit. John’s Jesus promises that Holy Spirit, that the Father Son Paraclete ministry, that will indwell, abide with us, and teach us all things. Growth in faith towards fulfilled hope is not a matter of merely human imagination with its tendency for fantasising and fictionalising, but of a creative imagination coached and enabled by the Creator.

So, a good spiritual exercise for us in Advent is to read and re-read—to give ourselves over to the gospel accounts. To go along with their program to get us acquainted with God’s

grace upon grace and so used to, God's breaking up our preconceptions, that we become people who can say when the next crisis hits, 'Here we go again! Whoever you are, I love you!' That we become like doubting Thomas who can see the glory in the gaping wounds and gasp, 'You are my Lord and my God!'