

true worship

a sermon preached at evensong on the

fifth sunday after pentecost

14 July 2019

The Commemoration of John Keble's Assize Sermon

at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: psalm 25; Amos 5: 14-24; Luke 9:37-50

I speak to you in the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.+

Just over two weeks ago, I had the privilege of visiting 'St Mary the Virgin University Church' on High Street in Oxford, England. It was there where John Keble preached his famous Assize Sermon on this date in the year 1833, sometimes known as a sermon on the 'National Apostasy.' I had visited the University Church a number of times before in my several trips to Oxford over the years. But because I knew that I'd be preaching this evening at this special service of Choral Evensong, I lingered just a bit longer, gazing up at the imposing oak pulpit from which Keble delivered his sermon some 186 years ago today.

John Keble was one of the pillars of the Oxford Movement, whose members were known as the 'Tractarians,' or more pejoratively, the 'Newmanites' or the 'Puseyites.' The Oxford Movement, of course, was largely responsible for allowing the worship of the Church of England to recover a sense of beauty, mystery and sacramentality in the nineteenth century, along with a more Catholic ecclesiology and view of the sacraments. In addition, the Oxford Movement developed a strong sense of social justice and responsibility within the Church of England. This was perhaps best seen in Oxford Movement clergy who chose to work in the slums of the urban centres in Britain, as well as in the establishment of the Christian Social Union, which advocated just wages, fairness in the renting of property, a concern around infant mortality and just working conditions of factory labourers, just to name a few. So out of this, the Oxford Movement and its adherents were essentially known for their Catholic theology and liturgy, as well as their strong commitment to social justice.

With this history in view, it's appropriate for us to hear and meditate upon the Scripture we have heard read (and sung) this evening. More specifically, in today's readings, and with the history of John Keble and the Oxford Movement as our backdrop, we are challenged to think some about what we hold to be important and a priority in our lives as Anglicans, particularly for those of us who resonate with the forebears within the Oxford and Tractarian Movements.

Both of our Scripture lessons, along with the Magnificat – the Song of Mary – from Luke chapter 1, all touch on the issue of justice, and what's at stake if we think of ourselves as finding favour with God and yet tolerate injustice around us.

In our first reading, Amos the Prophet laments the situation in which Israel finds itself in the eighth century BCE. The people of Israel are religiously arrogant while at the same time allowing injustice to reign. As a result, Amos the Prophet announces their imminent military conquest and destruction if they do not repent.

Earlier in chapter 5, Amos states that Israel has ‘trample[d] on the poor and take[n] from them levies of grain’; the rich among them ‘have built houses hewn of stone’ in which they will never live; they take bribes while at the same time they ‘push aside the needy at the [city] gate’. So in tonight’s first lesson from Amos, we see the Prophet call the people of Israel to ‘seek good and not evil,’ to ‘hate evil and love good, and establish justice at the [city] gate’ so that God can be gracious and merciful to them. Because at the moment, as a result of Israel’s tolerance of injustice and their abuse of the neediest, God ‘despises’ and ‘takes no delight’ in the religious traditions of Israel, in their festivals, assemblies, sacrifices, and songs of worship. And when God’s judgment ultimately befalls Israel, it’ll be a torrent, it’ll be a tsunami, it’ll be ‘justice rolling down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.’ The injustice that Israel tolerates and even promulgates will be met with God’s justice in favour of the neediest and against the powerful, and influential and wealthy in Israel.

Tonight’s second lesson – a reading from the Gospel according to St Luke – gives us a glimpse as to why injustice takes place, why human beings – even the most religiously devout – accept and facilitate injustice in their midst. St Luke tells us a story of where ‘an argument arose among [the disciples] as to which one of them was the greatest.’ Here, I think we see the simple reason why human beings so often fall prey to this propagation of injustice, either by neglect or by design – and that is a quest for greatness, a desire to be seen as the first, as the most important, as the one at the top. This quest for greatness, this desire to be first fosters a culture of materialism and greed, an urge to accumulate more even when resources are in short supply. Being ‘great,’ one could argue, is a chief cause of injustice in this world.

But what’s the antidote for this desire for greatness? For Jesus in tonight’s reading from Luke, it is found in a child. ‘Jesus...took a little child and put it by his side, and said to [the disciples], “Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me...; for the least among all of you is the greatest.”’ In other words, whoever wants to be known as being ‘great’ needs to become ‘the least,’ become like a little child, which, in ancient Mediterranean culture, had little value and was seen to be a liability and not an asset.

This desire for greatness is something that not only plagued the Israelites in the book of Amos and the disciples of Jesus, but also is something that we cannot escape from as well. There’s been a lot of talk lately about ‘greatness,’ about making particular countries ‘great again’. ‘MAGA’ – M-A-G-A – is an acronym that has crept into our lexicon as of late, largely due to the individual who currently occupies the White House. While a tag line for a president or a political campaign, I would argue the ‘greatness’ to which the tag line aspires is more sinister, and is coming at some significant costs – costs to the most vulnerable, including the poor, people of colour, immigrants, and costs to God’s creation.

So what’s the response to MAGA? I think it is the Magnificat. The Magnificat – the Song of Mary – always features in our services of Evensong, in part because it is a powerful reminder of God’s concern for the lowliest among us and God’s repudiation of power and wealth, particularly power and wealth that exploits.

‘[The Lord God] has showed strength with his arm;
He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.
Has put down the mighty from their seat;
And has exalted the humble and meek.
He has filled the hungry with good things,

And the rich he has sent away empty.’

The Magnificat makes it clear just whose side God is on; he sides with the poor, the marginalized, with the sick, with the outcasts, with those who are most vulnerable among us. And God’s preference for the most vulnerable needs to be our preference as well. And this brings us back once again to the Prophet Amos, and brings us back to John Keble and the Oxford Movement.

The Anglo-Catholic tradition is known for its beautiful liturgies, for its emphasis on excellent choral music, for its rich aesthetics, and for its sophisticated theology of the Church and its sacraments. The Anglo-Catholic tradition can certainly trace these important emphases to the significant work of John Keble and the rest of the members of the Oxford Movement. But the Prophet Amos reminds us of the dangers of ritualism without a heart for justice. God stands with the poor and the neediest amongst us. Therefore, those who do not show compassion to the poor and to the neediest cannot possibly be worshipping God. Amos reminds us that God has no time for worship and ritual from those who do not see the poor and the needy as God sees them. John Keble and the rest of the Tractarians within the Oxford Movement of the nineteenth century understood this.

So for those of us who see themselves as heirs to Keble, to Newman, to Pusey, and so on, we need to not just establish this in our theology and worship, but live this commitment out in personal and meaningful ways. Let’s put the same effort and concern for the poor and the neediest that we put into our worship and our liturgical theology. And if we do so, we are well on our way to heeding the call of the Prophet Amos to ‘seek good and not evil,’ to ‘hate evil and love good, and establish justice [at the city] gate.’ This is the vision of John Keble and the Oxford Movement. Let it be our vision as well, as we try to live as faithful disciples of Jesus in a complex and needy world.

In the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.+