

aroma of christ

a sermon preached at
'Friends of Anglican Music' Evensong
Saturday 21 June 2014

at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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Lecture: 2 Corinthians 2:12-3:6¹

The genesis of Christian faith is indisputably the crucible of dying and rising – in shorthand, the Paschal Mystery. There is no credible account of Christian faith apart from this central reality. Yet the instrument of growth of Christian influence as institution is indisputably the exact opposite of Paschal Mystery – imperial power. The character shift which Constantine's Christendom precipitated is increasingly well documented. Christ came off second best to empire.

What we polite Anglicans prefer not to discuss – and even those of us who are not Anglicans but who admire or find solace in the beauty of Anglican evensong might prefer to ignore – is Anglicanism's unmistakable lingering odour of Christendom. "O Lord save the Queen". The Book of Common Prayer's orientation is thoroughly imperial. Linguistic beauty and elegant Elizabethan lilt it may enshrine – yet this cannot disguise its empire orientation. The Book, as is well known, was a crucial part of the machinery by which imperial-monarchical control was enforced upon the nation. Allegiance to Christ was thus tragically subsumed under allegiance to monarch and nation-state.

In the early pre-Christendom church it was very dangerous to declare 'Jesus is Lord'. For to do so was to refuse to accept that Caesar was Lord – a reckless stance that could cost your life! But with the advent of Christendom, the claim 'Jesus is Lord' completely changed its currency value. Jesus' name may have been invoked – but Jesus' name was now one of the instruments of power and control of empire. Anglicanism is shot through with this odorous taint.

Well, as everybody knows, Christendom has been breaking down for a very long time. Though nothing once-powerful relinquishes readily. There's far too much at stake: property, possessions, power and influence! 'Jesus is Lord' is now a glib expression – frequently antithetical to the self-emptying of Christ. Listening to the rhetorical loudhailers of an aggressive neo-Christendom – highly focussed on marketing, numbers, market-share, and all visible signs of 'success' – we might well wonder, who *really* is 'Lord'?

I do not underestimate the fact that facing up to the consequences of Christendom is very difficult for us – and in potentially far-reaching ways. For instance, just this week there was a news item about community resistance against a West Melbourne Baptist church's plans to build an apartment block.² Apparently, the colonial authorities gave the church 'right to occupy' the land in 1866 – and in 1961 this was converted into free title. The owners of the title now want to develop a block of land which has been 'dormant' for some time. But some people in the community are saying that as the land was a gift from the colonial authorities the church ought to gift it back to the people.

This highlights the awkward fact that under the general residual influence of Christendom, being empire-friendly had its very tangible benefits.

Now if this was true even for 'dissenters' such as Baptists, how much the more so for English Christendom's biggest winners! Just think about the potential implications for the vast property portfolio of the Anglican Diocese of Melbourne – given far more land than Baptists under the prevailing denominational settlement at the time of colonisation. And is it perhaps just a matter of time before questions might be asked about the highly valuable land which this fair parish occupies?

¹ Lecture set for the day

² 'Residents fight Baptist church apartment block plans', *The Age* online, 13 June 2014, <http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/residents-fight-baptist-church-apartment-block-plans-20140613-zs6ir.html>

On what grounds would we defend our rather privileged position? And will our defence not generate in the community an odour of self-interest – an odour of protection of territory, market-share, of property and possessions, an odour of determination to guard our perceived importance or influence?

We cannot ignore the fact that for increasing numbers of people the churches are ‘on the nose’ – and not only because of sex abuses. Indeed, it may even be that the current sex abuse malaise is a projected form of the deeper issue which Christendom-tainted churches have ignored for so many centuries – namely, that Christendom’s shocking inversion of the evangel of Christ has reduced the church to being merely one more powerful institution, fighting for survival, competing for market share.

In his second letter to the church at Corinth St Paul describes the disciple of Christ as a ‘fragrant aroma’. “Thanks be to God, who in Christ leads us... and through us spreads in every place the fragrance (**οσμην** *osmēn*) that comes from knowing [Christ]. For we are the aroma (**ευωδια** *euōdia*) of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one a fragrance (**οσμη** *osmē*) from death to death, to the other a fragrance (**οσμη** *osmē*) from life to life.”³

Unlike the pacific tone of his first letter to the church at Corinth, this letter is fierce. His testy defence of the **ευαγγελιον** *evangelion* makes sense when we consider the two kinds of religion in his sights: on the one hand right-wing legalists pushing for tightening up of Torah rules; on the other hand left-wing entrepreneurs of the spirit with fancy-sounding rhetoric and inflated claims. Paul criticises both for being fundamentally un-Christlike: the one for attempting to reverse spiritual evolution, to undo Christ’s evangel of liberation; the other for perverting **ευαγγελιον**, by substituting Christ’s sacrificial self-emptying with self-promoting success and prosperity doctrine.

The right wing legalists represent a kind of regressive rear-guard religious imperialism – for even though Judaism had its back to the wall in the Roman Empire milieu, nevertheless, prior to the Temple’s destruction in 70CE, considerable power still accrued to Jerusalem and the Temple political parties, as we see repeatedly in Jesus’ critique of religious legal machinery.

The left wing represent a kind of prosperity doctrine – mere “peddlers of God’s word”,⁴ claiming to prove God’s blessing on the basis of their ‘successes’ and their rhetorical flourishes.⁵

Sound familiar? *Plus ça change!*

In this second letter we see that Paul speaks a great deal about being a poor rhetorician⁶ – about not having ‘successes’ to parade,⁷ and about a great deal of suffering and apparent failure.⁸ And these ‘unsuccessful’ signs were his boast as an apostle!⁹ The fragrance which he describes as ‘life to life’ is marked by rhetorical humility, by suffering, and by apparent failure.

For this is the Paul who begins this letter declaring that “just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through Christ”.¹⁰ Later in the letter he will say that the disciple of Christ is one “having nothing, and yet possessing everything”,¹¹ who can only boast of weakness.¹² Elsewhere he declared famously that “what is sown in weakness... is raised in power”,¹³ and that “we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews, and foolishness to Greeks”.¹⁴ In all this we see the genuineness of Paul’s apostleship – since it is entirely congruent with Jesus’ teaching and modelling of self-emptying, sacrificial love.

So for Paul, the fragrance of right-wing legalists and left-wing entrepreneurs alike is a “fragrance from death to death”.¹⁵ There is a fragrance, yes – but it is actually a stench, a deadly stench. This stench pervades Christendom – and neo-Christendom, all its attempts to rebuild itself.

But the fragrance of sweet smell (**οσμην ευωδιασ** *osmēn euōdias*) is the self-offering of Christ in dying-unto-life.¹⁶ It is the fragrance (**οσμησ** *osmēs*) which fills the house when a woman

³ 2 Corinthians 2:14-16

⁴ 2 Corinthians 2:17

⁵ 2 Corinthians 3:1-3

⁶ 2 Corinthians 2:17, 10:10

⁷ 2 Corinthians 2:8

⁸ 2 Corinthians 11:3-30

⁹ 2 Corinthians 1:12, 3:1, 5:12, 10:13,17

¹⁰ 2 Corinthians 1:5

¹¹ 2 Corinthians 6:10

¹² 2 Corinthians 11:30

¹³ 1 Corinthians 15:43

¹⁴ 1 Corinthians 1:22

¹⁵ 2 Corinthians 2:16

¹⁶ Ephesians 5:2 employs the same Greek words used by Paul in 2 Corinthians.

anoints Jesus for his burial¹⁷ – a fragrance which Jesus declares will be remembered always.¹⁸ The sufferings of Christ are abundant for us. And the crucial point of the euaggelion is this: the disciple is to *undergo the same suffering of dying-into-life*.¹⁹

Our calling is to be, with Paul, an ‘aroma of Christ’ – not the lingering empire-Christendom stench of death to death, misusing Jesus’ name as instrument of power and control, or as prosperity doctrine mascot. Rather, we are to be the sweet fragrance of life to life, embodying ourselves in all we do the sacrificial and saving self-emptying of Christ.

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John 12:3

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Matthew 26:13, Mark 14:9

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2 Corinthians 1:6