

*transformation*  
a sermon preached on the  
*third Sunday in Lent*  
8 March 2015  
at  
*st john's*  
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL  
*by fr david moore, vicar*

the lections: Exodus 20:1-17, Psalm 19, John 2:13-22

In our search for God we must begin with things – with something concrete. The newborn infant is only able to perceive ‘love’ because of the concrete reality of the mother and the father. All the religious traditions have mediated the great spiritual truths by the means of the various concrete forms: temple, mosque, synagogue, church, icon, statue, sacred script, Bible, Quran, Upanishad, Bhagavad Gita, and so on. What we forget so readily, however, is that all the religious traditions also declare that such concrete forms are merely pointers: they are not themselves the Reality towards which they point. “You shall have no other gods before me”.<sup>1</sup>

So the Jerusalem Temple is called ‘house of God’: yet it is not in truth where God dwells. In due course Christian doctrine would come to realise likewise: the church building is the ‘house of God’; yet it is not in truth where God dwells. Similarly, the Bible is the principle written record of the ‘Word of God’: but in fact it is not actually the Word of God at all. That 16<sup>th</sup> century over-compensation is a tragic distortion. The true Word of God is not a book but the living Presence of Christ in the power of the Spirit. To confuse the Bible with the living Word of God is not Bible faithfulness, but bibliolatry.

In today’s dramatic gospel story Jesus’ anger burns hot against the spiritual error to which religious people are prone. They have confused the concrete Temple and all its customs for the Divine Reality who is beyond all concrete forms. Jesus’ very human reaction is intense: dramatic, graphic, energetic, unmistakeable – memorable! In their talk about the 46 years of the temple’s construction the religious leaders reveal how literal and concrete minded they are. Jesus tells them that the true temple is the ‘temple of the body’: the seat of the Divine Presence in the body being the human heart.

So while God is initially detected through things – nature, buildings, the loving actions of people, illuminating doctrines, and so on – God is in fact none of these. God’s Presence can only be fully known *beyond all things* – interiorly, in the heart.

I need to say that I am speaking personally. I am well acquainted with this confusion in my own discipleship. Over the years I have latched onto various things – people, buildings, scriptures, liturgies, ideas, customs – confusing them, mistakenly thinking they are the Real. And piece by piece all these things have had to be stripped away – it’s a painful process.

I cannot adequately describe to you the significance the St Luke’s (Christchurch) church building held for me. It was concretely and literally the house of God – truly a beautiful sacred place – and had been the object and focus of my loving devotion and considerable energies. That *nothing* of it is left – save some of the stones now forming a labyrinth in the corner of a large empty block of land – dramatically and excruciatingly and emphatically illuminated Jesus’ teaching. The true ‘holy place’ is in the hearts of the people: which, unlike the concrete structure, is being raised up!

Lent three’s gospel this year is perhaps an uncannily timed gift to all of us at St John’s. The concretising of our liturgical forms – whether that be the form of the words, or the familiarity of the actions, or the ‘memorial’ furniture – is a sure sign of our common tendency to confuse these things for the Divine Presence. Let’s be honest: we are frightened by the prospect of evolution: in the words, the actions, the furniture. We are prone to the same spiritual error as those who are on the receiving end of Jesus’ white-hot anger in today’s gospel.

This Lenten gospel, then, is a wonderful gift to us – given so that we may remember the spiritual truth which we so readily forget. Our spiritual life begins with concrete forms, yes of course; but the Divine Presence we seek cannot be found in any concrete forms. We must transcend all such forms.

---

<sup>1</sup> Exodus 20:3-5

To say this another way: Christian discipleship does not consist in preserving things. Rather, Christian discipleship consists in *being transformed*. The church is not a historical society: not a group of people feeling comfortable in each other's company, sitting in the same seats, not a tribal-ethnic identity. While all these are in themselves good and to be celebrated, it is dangerous to confuse the Divine Presence for mere concrete forms, customs, and habits. This is idolatry.

The spiritual task is transformation: dying and rising, resurrection life. We are not called to preserve our concrete forms: but for our hearts to be broken open, like the Bread at the Altar; to drink from the same dangerous and life-giving cup of transformation which is Christ's.

[vicar@stjohnscamberwell.org.au](mailto:vicar@stjohnscamberwell.org.au)