

*from within*  
a sermon preached on the  
*fourteenth sunday after Pentecost*  
30 August 2015  
at  
*st john's*  
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL  
*by fr david moore, vicar*

the lections: Deuteronomy 4:1-2,6-9; Psalm 15; James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8,14-23

It's all about the heart.

For Jesus, as a faithful Jew, the heart is the seat and centre of human life. He stands in a long line of Jewish prophets when he quotes Isaiah to the creepy religious police from Jerusalem: "This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me".<sup>1</sup> You can think the approved thoughts, Jesus says, you can perform the prescribed or expected duties, you can belong to the approved religious club. Yet unless coming from the heart all this is hypocrisy.<sup>2</sup> We recall that Matthew's Jesus is rather more colourful of speech: "you are like white-washed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth".<sup>3</sup>

It's all about the heart. For Jesus, indeed for all the great spiritual teachers, it's about getting to 'the heart of the matter'. All that washing,<sup>4</sup> all external religious observation, all 'traditions of the elders',<sup>5</sup> even the charitable good works of care for the widows counseled by James,<sup>6</sup> can be avoidance of the heart – which amounts to abandoning the commandment of God.<sup>7</sup> For it is from within, in the human heart, that we may be both united to and separated from the Divine Love.

It's all about the heart – the within.<sup>8</sup> It is Christ's living from an interior authenticity that offends and threatens the religious police. And it is Christ's living from the heart that enables him to withstand their onslaught.

The problem of the 'moral life' – good in itself, of course, and without doubt desperately needed in so many quarters – is that it so readily leads to inflation, to self-deception, thence to moralism, self-righteousness, hypocrisy, triumphalism. Such evil comes from within.

In a world that places so much emphasis on externals, on style and fashion and appearance – in absolutely every domain of life, including sometimes church life – the teaching of Christ is truly radical here. He is not radical in teaching that the heart is central to being human – for he stands in a long line of prophets in that regard. But he is radical in the manner and extent of his embodying this teaching – specifically, by the self-emptying rejection of all attempts to win God's approval, relinquishing even that supreme virtue in Israel, being 'the elect', chosen-ness.

The perennial problem with being 'the elect', with having wonderful "statutes and ordinances" to define the boundaries of the 'chosen'<sup>9</sup> - whether that be the Jewish version, the Christian version, or the Islamic version – is precisely to be found in this. For it is perfectly possible to be a member of the 'perfectly unstained'<sup>10</sup> elect, yet not live from the truth of the heart.

Living from the heart is costly – possibly even to death. One immediate consequence of Christ's truthfulness is an appalling alone-ness. Not only is he profoundly separated from the religious rule keepers: he is in a sense even more profoundly separated from his 'friends'. Christ's reality in this sheds light on our experience. We may feel a profound separation from the world – superficially observing external rules and regulations and social customs. Yet infinitely more painful is the kind of alone-ness we may feel within the Christian community itself – where superficiality and convention can be a cover for the unacknowledged interior.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 7:6; Isaiah 29:13

<sup>2</sup> Mark 7:7

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 23:7

<sup>4</sup> Mark 7:2-5

<sup>5</sup> Mark 7:3

<sup>6</sup> James 1:27

<sup>7</sup> Mark 7:8

<sup>8</sup> *εσωθεν* *esōthen*, from the verb *εσω* *esō*.

<sup>9</sup> Deuteronomy 4:6-7,24

<sup>10</sup> James 1:27

Thus Christ is the ‘pioneer’ and ‘completer’<sup>11</sup> of our salvation – the one who goes this way before us – our companion in the intense alone-ness we can experience as we ever more deeply live from within, from the true center which is the heart.

Now, with all that in mind, I would like to conclude by drawing some thread between this, and the matter before us as the people of St John’s at this time. I have set before us a vision, as you know, for a practical, tangible way of giving expression to the various threads of the parish’s Mission Action Plan – and invited us to undergo this period of discernment in the matter.

Among concerns raised is the term ‘contemplative’ – a deeply misunderstood word. There is a perception that ‘contemplative’ is a synonym for doing nothing – for a kind of self-indulgent bludging. So I would like to attempt to assist us to see how the very spiritual problem confronting us in our time – and its solution – is identified in the Christian tradition’s teaching on the centrality of contemplation, the contemplative way.

I have previously referred to Archbishop Rowan Williams’ landmark address to the 2012 Synod of Bishops in Rome, and in particular drawn attention to paragraph eight:

Contemplation is very far from being just one kind of thing that Christians do: it is the key to prayer, liturgy, art and ethics, the key to the essence of a renewed humanity that is capable of seeing the world and other subjects in the world with freedom – freedom from self-oriented, acquisitive habits and the distorted understanding that comes from them. To put it boldly, contemplation is the only ultimate answer to the unreal and insane world that our financial systems and our advertising culture and our chaotic and unexamined emotions encourage us to inhabit. To learn contemplative practice is to learn what we need so as to live truthfully and honestly and lovingly. It is a deeply revolutionary matter.<sup>12</sup>

We note that Archbishop declares that contemplation is the “key to the essence of a renewed humanity”. ‘Living contemplatively’ is precisely what we see Jesus do – free from self-oriented, acquisitive habits. Jesus is able to resist evil and endure the searing alone-ness experienced by the person who lives authentically *from within*, precisely because his very active life of ministry is contemplatively oriented and grounded. Jesus’ contemplative living is radical, and revolutionary – and transforms humankind, because outer action is grounded in inner truth.

Thus, living contemplatively is the call to every disciple – no matter what area or activity of life – every disciple called to live authentically from within, from the heart. Not an esoteric specialty for some, “just one kind of thing”, but the common Christian vocation by our baptism into Christ’s dying and rising.

So if we care about the church and about evangelism – as I know we do – Archbishop Rowan’s counsel on this is worth pondering:

Unless our evangelisation can open the door to [the contemplative way], it will run the risk of trying to sustain faith on the basis of an un-transformed set of human habits – with the all too familiar result that the Church comes to look unhappily like so many purely human institutions, anxious, busy, competitive and controlling. In a very important sense, a true enterprise of evangelisation will always be a re-evangelisation of ourselves as Christians also, a rediscovery of why our faith is different, transfiguring – a recovery of our own new humanity.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Hebrews 2:10 Greek: **τελειῶσαι** *teleiōsai*

<sup>12</sup> Rowan Williams, ‘The Archbishop of Canterbury’s Address to the Thirteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith’, 12 October 2012, para 8, cited at: <http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/2645/archbishops-address-to-the-synod-of-bishops-in-rome#sthash.bq3qTym6.dpuf>

<sup>13</sup> Rowan Williams, para 15.