

unconstrained freedom

a sermon preached on the

16th Sunday after Pentecost

28 September 2014

at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

by fr david moore, vicar

The Lections: Philippians 2:1-13, Matthew 21:23-32

A baptism is obviously a joyous occasion. And on this day we are delighted to welcome Edward David – and his family and friends! As you entered this building you encountered the Font – and the great Paschal Candle, lit on this day and only recently re-located to its present position at the entrance. Touching baptismal water as we enter here – perhaps making a moistened sign of the cross on our foreheads or our breast – is the sensual outer sign of an inner and invisible gift. Mere idea become living matter and action. In this watery sign we are recalled to a deep and sublime truth about our lives and our being: life is pure gift! Our very entry into life is gift. We do not bring it into being: we do not *deserve* it.

At a baptism there are words, yes. There's a 'creed', there are declarations. But doctrine is not legal statement. Rather, doctrine is symbol. Symbol gestures through the senses towards that which is ultimately un-nameable, unfathomable mystery. Where words keep running out, symbol is inexhaustible. More like poetry or art – than law and regulation – a symbol beckons us into a fullness of humanity, religion not merely in the head, but in the body. Christ is himself a living, embodied symbol, transcending law – not 'abolishing' it but completing it.

So in spite of how baptism may have been presented by the churches as mechanism for institutional control, what we do here today is really more like singing a love-song. We welcome Edward into the great love-song of the creator. Moreover, the love-song into which Edward is baptised is not merely some historic association – that would just be competitive tribalism. And it is clear to all that there is no future for the world in tribalism.

The world into which Edward is baptised will require him to participate in a cooperative global human enterprise as never before. The planet's very future may depend, Edward, on what happens in your lifetime. That global human enterprise – of which we are just beginning to catch glimpses – is suffocating under the cloud of incessant and insistent rationalism and materialism. People are increasingly finding it hard to breathe. CO₂ emissions and global warming are like an outer sign of an inner and invisible situation. A CO₂-polluted atmosphere is an outer sign of souls struggling for breath – choked by a deadly excess of toxic consumerism and rationalism, still threatened by old warring tribalisms, religious, economic, ideological, ethnic, and territorial. Life as we know it is threatened. These events are suggesting to us that human participation in a global undertaking is vital to ongoing creation.

This week's momentous outer event in New York, the Climate Summit, is like an outer and visible sign of the inward grace upon which our future depends. The future is calling for a summit of trans-tribal commitment to the common wealth, to mother earth herself. Baptism envisaged as membership of an elite would be pure blasphemy – merely fostering old rivalries. As symbol, the 'Body of Christ' is like a 'summit' of pan-tribal, indeed post-tribal, commitment to the common-wealth, to each other, to mother earth, to ongoing creation. Can we imagine baptism in terms of commitment to and participation in an 'earth summit'?

In the gospel fragment set for this day Jesus is perceived to possess authority. But when questioned about the origin of this authority he refuses to 'reveal his sources'. The authority which he possesses is an unconstrained freedom – the Greek means a sense of there being no hindrance, of unlimited possibility, the source of an absolute power. Little wonder the religious rule-keepers are so threatened! To reiterate, being baptised into Christ's death and resurrection is not club membership – or rule keeping, or supposed moral purity – all of which would be a sick parody of Christ's astonishing evangel. Rather, by water and Spirit Edward is called into a lifetime of undergoing the same way as

the Christ – to receive true authority as God’s son, and grow into God’s landscape of unconstrained freedom.

But what is this freedom? After all, ‘freedom’ is promised every moment in a consumption-fixated, dollar-driven culture. The test of true authority – and thus true freedom – is clearly articulated in the way of the Christ. This is the way of self-emptying, **kenwsis** *kenōsis*. St Paul’s hymn, our first reading today, is the great hymn of self-emptying. It is reckoned to be one of the earliest Christian hymns – and probably one of the earliest creeds. Thus the religious legalists and powerbrokers do not possess true authority, because, true authority is unconstrained freedom, absolute power, *which empties itself*. Since it is abundantly clear that self-preoccupied grasping is precisely the cause of our planet’s sicknesses, the future of humankind and planet depends on individuals undergoing this unconstrained freedom, self-emptying way of the Christ.

So Edward, participation by baptism in this ‘earth summit’ of self-emptying is a big vocation – indeed, it’s an adult vocation. Just as well you have a lifetime for the task! And may the Eucharist nourish you in this great undertaking of truly free self-emptying love.

vicar@stjohnscamberwell.org.au