

are you able?
a sermon preached on the
twenty-first sunday after Pentecost
18 October 2015
at
st john's
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
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the lections: Isaiah 53.4-12; Psalm 91.9-16, Hebrews 5.1-10 Mark 10:32-45

Many people imagine that the religious task is about winning the approval of a difficult-to-please judgemental Father deity, thus securing personal prosperity and 'eternal reward' from 'Him'. We were reminded of this fact in last week's gospel story of the wealthy man.¹ 'God' has to be pleased, in order to get 'benefits'.

In today's gospel Jesus once again deals with human insecurity which seeks personal approval, and human self-centredness which seeks personal prosperity and 'eternal reward'. This time, though, it's the prayer of his own disciples which attracts his razor-sharp and incisive spiritual diagnosis: "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptised with the baptism that I am to be baptised with?"²

Jesus *sees* them. He sees *into* them. He sees *through* them. He sees the danger of the religious persona which it is all too easy to put on. James and John have been with him more than enough, seen and heard enough to know better. They have even been taken up the mountain, they have witnessed transfiguration.³ Yet for all that, they have no idea what they are asking.⁴ Their request for being seated at Jesus' right and left hand betrays their abiding and deep-seated spiritual feudalism.

Let me explain what I mean by that word 'feudal'. In the feudal world-view, there's a patriarch of some kind who rules over all his subjects, according to a predetermined hierarchical order. The role of subjects is to submit to their place and to please their lord who knows all and judges all.

Paradoxically, we post-modern well-educated types no longer 'believe in' or live in such a world – yet the Christian image of God remains largely stuck in such a world-view. Among the many reasons why thoughtful people of good will leave the churches is precisely because of this incongruence. With few exceptions, the churches refuse to face up to this obvious fact.

Returning to the disciples, they still regard God in the same terms as the world, as overlord of a patriarchal hierarchical kingdom, promoting and demoting with royal divine right, threatening wrath if necessary. Their idea of messiah remains embedded in a static world-view, firmly stuck in patriarchal, imperial, triumphalist, tribal, monarchical, juridical-legal frames of reference.

Let me clarify what I mean by those terms. Their image of God is of one who: is most definitely a *Father*, with capital 'F'; created at the beginning an *eternally fixed* world order; rules an *empire-kingdom*; an empire which is *self-promoting* and self-aggrandising; who needs our adulation and *obeisance*; and whose subjects' purpose is simply to obey and fulfil a *predetermined order*; founded on the assumption that there are *insiders and outsiders*; law, punishment and reward its *operating system*. They want a messiah who will *rescue* them from and conquer their enemies. They want a messiah who will reward them⁵, and those like them, but burn in an eternal fire all who do not. In Luke's gospel James and John, we recall, specifically suggest this to Jesus.⁶

James and John are still with us – *in us* indeed. The churches continue to teach and promote a static world-view overseen by this patriarchal monarch dispensing favours to loyal subjects – a world of insiders and outsiders, of 'the saved' and 'the damned'. The dominant image of messiah most evident in church teaching and preaching and worship and hymns is still a rescuer, to whom we appeal in order to win eternal rewards. Many Christians continue to envisage mission as conquest, the world's peoples as territory to be occupied, the task of the church to sell 'Jesus', to entice people into our religious club.

The language of church worship reflects this patriarchal world-view: prayers, hymns, 'mission' statements, and so on envisage God in feudal terms, a hierarchal order which divides the world's peoples into

¹ Mark 10:17-31

² Mark 10:38

³ Mark 9:2-8

⁴ Mark 9:32

⁵ Mark 9:34, 10:37

⁶ Luke 9:54

insiders and outsiders. Listen carefully to the way in which we pray with that word ‘Lord’, for instance. Our language of ‘Lord’-ship remains regressively feudal. Jesus the Christ turned upside-down the meaning of the Ancient Near East concept of ‘Lord’⁷ – the Human One came not to be served, but to serve⁸ – but the church tragically and perversely prefers the feudalism Jesus explicitly rejected.

And the use of church building space reflects these same attitudes and assumptions: people are arranged in church buildings in a geometry that continues to reinforce a feudal worldview: marked by hierarchy, division, subservience. The mega-churches which are supposedly ‘relevant’ and ‘with it’ are in fact structured remarkably like the medieval cathedral – only now, not only is all beauty stripped out, but Altar and the Tabernacle are replaced by the rather more dangerous smooth-talking celebrity pastor and his band.

Feudal-patriarchal religion runs very deep, in spite of all our education, sophistication – and wealth. And, as with the Pharisees and Scribes with whom Jesus does battle, those who supposedly know their bibles very well tend to be most deeply embedded in this monarchical reward-and-punishment pagan religion. Talk that *sounds* like allegiance to Jesus can in fact be more truly allegiance to a static feudal-patriarchal monarchical worldview – totally opposed to the Spirit of Jesus the Christ.

Fear not! Jesus the Christ loves us and sees eternally through us, longing for our liberation and wholeness, by first naming the truth about us: “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptised with the baptism that I am to be baptised with?”

Jesus is ‘on the way’ to *neither* medieval nor church-planting patriarchal prosperity and rescue doctrine. No, he’s on the way to ‘Jerusalem’⁹ – to the place where those who lose their life will find it.¹⁰ His cup and his baptism are the way of dying, of self-emptying: the very opposite of feudal patriarchal monarchy reward-and-punishment prosperity religion.

His Way is a spiritual revolution – the ‘new humanity’. His ‘glory’ is the opposite of our triumphalist feudal image.¹¹ He is a ‘Son’ who becomes complete¹² by the way of suffering.¹³ His ‘Lord’-ship is one of affliction and silence.¹⁴

In short, Christ discipleship is the Way of the Paschal Mystery. Baptism into Christ’s death and resurrection is drowning to feudal religion, being born into dying-into-life Messiahship. This is the vocation he invites us to accept – the cup we are invited to drink, as the baptised constituted equally, as one people encircling the workbench of his new creation.

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⁷ Mark 10:42-45

⁸ Mark: 10:45

⁹ Mark 10:32,33

¹⁰ Mark 10:35

¹¹ Hebrews 5:5

¹² Greek: **τελειωθεισ** *teleiōtheis*, literally having been completed. The usual English translation ‘perfect’ conveys a moral tone antithetical to the Greek idea.

¹³ Hebrews 5:9

¹⁴ Isaiah 53:7-9