

the baptismal life
a sermon preached on the
tenth sunday after pentecost
29 July 2018
at
st john's
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
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the lections: 2 Kings 4: 42-44; Psalm 145; Ephesians 3: 14-21; John 6: 1-21.

Baptism—How do we live the Baptismal life?

One of the great differences that exist in the practise of Christianity is between those who stress that faith is about certainty and clear-cut answers and those who see faith as always involving uncertainties and unanswered questions. For some people the first mentioned difference is by far the most attractive. Perhaps this is part of the appeal of the more literalist and fundamentalist forms of Christianity of religion. Perhaps there is something satisfying in knowing exactly what is true and what is right and what is not. I have experienced in my ministry people asking me about certain teaching of the Anglican Church, e.g. about the Trinity. I have usually replied that: 'some of us believe this' and some of us believe that' and 'some of us are not sure what we believe.' Sometimes some people are very dissatisfied with this sort of answer and they go off to join a fundamentalist group--where they can get all the answers they were looking for, and perhaps a few more.

In this division I am quite clear where I stand. I am deeply distrustful of anyone who has too many certainties. As St. Paul says, 'O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and the knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgements, and how inscrutable his ways! For who has known the mind of God?' [Rom. 11:33-4]. Whenever I use the word God I am naming a mystery I do not even begin to understand. God's ways are not our ways, nor God's thoughts our thoughts. As St. Augustine said: 'Anything which your intellect is able to comprehend is too small to be God.'

For Paul this is basic. 'May you be strong enough to grasp the love of Christ--though it is beyond knowledge.' [Eph. 3:19] At the heart of any serious religion is the recognition that we walk by faith and not by sight; that simply we do not know.

Of course, there are many who seem to know. If we ask them about the furniture of heaven, they can tell you. But notice – how often those who talk as if they know all about the next world are often the ones who are most ignorant about this one? Put them in front of an item of modern technology and they say 'I don't know how to work this'. But ask them what God was doing when he made the world and they can tell you in a flash. I am sure that they do not know – how could they?

Too much certainty is unhealthy. It cramps the mind. It leaves us satisfied with half-truths. It ignores clues that might lead us in new directions. It has closed eyes and ears. –too much certainty dams us up to where we currently stand. In addition, isn't there something positively dangerous about too much certainty? Too much certainty breeds vanity and bigotry. People never do evil as cheerfully as when they do it in the absolute conviction that they are right.

For Paul faith is beyond knowledge – we reach it after being drawn towards truths that infinitely exceed our capacity to grasp. If this is true we should be looking very carefully at our belief systems that claim to rest upon absolute intellectual certainty.

There is a virtue in an economy in belief. There is a virtue in saying: 'I believe, but I do not know'. There is a virtue in saying: 'I believe, and yet I may be wrong'. There is virtue in saying with Paul: 'Now we see only puzzling reflections in a mirror'.

There is virtue in saying:

'We limit not the truth of God to our poor reach of mind

By notions of our day and sect, crude, partial and confined.'

Tennyson was right:

There lives more faith in honest doubt,
Believe me, than in half the creeds.

But if Paul is an incorrigible liberal that does not mean he has no certainties. ‘May you be strong enough to grasp the love of Christ and to know it – although it is beyond knowledge’. We may understand God only partially and dimly but we can know God personally and powerfully. We can be ‘rooted and grounded in love’. We can be ‘strengthened with might through his spirit in the inner person’. For Paul faith rests not in knowing the mind of God but on experiencing God’s love. In our lives there is marvel miracle and wonder.

This personal experience of the love of God comes in many different ways. Hugh Montefiore who later became a Bishop in the Church of England tells how in the middle part of the 1930s, in the schoolhouse in Ruby, he suddenly became aware of the presence of Christ. It was nothing physical; a photograph could not be taken of it. But he knew that he had to follow Jesus, and that he could not do anything but say ‘Yes’.

Many of us can recount in our own lives when the door of the spiritual universe has swung open. Usually it happens in the most unusual places without our being prepared for it, but we experience something of the power and the presence of God in our ordinary and everyday lives. We can’t produce photographic evidence of these encounters – but they happened and they change us – and bring us more into the direction of life that God wills for us all.

To many of our questions, there are no certain answers. Always we walk by faith not sight. But we can be ‘rooted and grounded in love’. And we can live confidently with our questions. We can accept our uncertainties and always be willing to change what we believe if new insight comes. ‘May you be strong enough to grasp the love of Christ and to know it – though it is beyond knowledge’.