

jesus' table
a sermon preached on the
fifteenth sunday after pentecost
28 August 2016
at
st john's
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
by *fr david moore*, vicar

the lections: Proverbs 25:6-7; Psalm 112, Hebrews 13:1-8,15-16, Luke 14:1-14

Why are they watching him so closely?¹ What kind of 'watching' is this? Are they watching closely so as to see, to learn, to grow? Are they watching closely because they desire to be transformed? Sadly, no. The Greek word suggests a darkness of motive, to 'lie in wait', to 'watch lurkingly', as the authoritative theological dictionary puts it.² This is the kind of watching that wants to make sure nothing new happens. This is the watching of an eagle preparing for a kill – as indeed the religious leaders are preparing to do. It is a kind of watching to ensure that religious rules are maintained. The religious leaders' reaction to this healing Jesus performs 'on the Sabbath' gives their game away.

How we 'watch', what we look for, the manner in which we see makes all the difference: between life and death; transformation and regression.

One of my favourite stories about Jorge Bergoglio at the time of his election as Pope Francis is the incident on the balcony. There's an ancient ermine red cape, the *cappa rubea*, traditionally placed on Pope's at their election. It's a highly symbolic act, a powerful sign of not only the spiritual but especially the imperial authority of Pope. Appearing on the balcony before the people for the first time, a Vatican official coming at him, to place upon him the *cappa rubea*, Francis is reputed to have refused, saying: "No thank you, Monsignor. You put it on, instead. Carnival time is over!"

Now lest we feel some smug superiority over the church of Rome – for whom the carnival is of course a long way from truly being over – let us consider the wider significance of the *cappa rubea* as symbol, well beyond Roman boundaries.

Let us briefly remind ourselves of our origins. The Christian church began as a reform movement, turning the religious rules upside down, to some extent 'underground', troubling dissenters, a 'little flock' on the edges of respectability – or completely outside of respectability. But with the advent of Constantine – beginning with the edict of Milan in 313, becoming solidified with the first council of Nicea in 325 – Christianity became the religion of empire. In so many ways the Jesus of the gospels was suppressed – even reversed – in favour of a refashioned Jesus serving the needs of imperial power and control.

Fast forward to us, dying remnants of the British Empire, we are inheritors of a now-collapsing empire religion. Look within the pages of the Book of Common Prayer and there we find the language and structure of empire. A St John's parish magazine of 1953 is a stark reminder that this imperial religion is not some ancient medieval memory, but likely to be formational in some of us still here today. The issue in question – at the time of the coronation of Elizabeth II – so graphically demonstrates the hierarchical, monarchical, imperial culture of dear Anglican Church at Camberwell junction.

We Anglicans in particular – and of course Christianity more generally – are steeped in respectability, hierarchy, order and control, in being dutiful citizens of the state – that is what Henry and those monarchs after him had in mind! We even managed to turn one of the most revolutionary of Gospel songs – the Magnificat, Mary's song of the demise of the rich and powerful – into a piece of gorgeous Anglican drawing room Evensong wallpaper, to comfort upper class religion! Many of our church buildings are full of signs and symbols, such as flags and memorials, of our close relationship with the state. With our cathedrals in city centres and

¹ Luke 14:1

² Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich (eds.), Geoffrey W Bromiley (trans.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament Volume VIII*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972, p146-7.

our lingering need to feel important, we have not yet relinquished our hankering after what today's gospel calls 'the places of honour'.³

Today's gospel, then, is God's gift to us for our spiritual renewal: "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."⁴ "On the road to Jerusalem"⁵, there's no room for special places of honour, for this is the path of self-emptying. And all the way to Jerusalem, on occasion after occasion – including the very last night – Jesus gathers people around a table. Jesus uses the ordinary table to proclaim an extraordinary gospel.

And this is why for Christians the Altar-Table – not the cross, in fact – is the central symbol of the liturgical gathering. It is the Altar-Table that proclaims and forms the new human community.

Michaelangelo was right about making a table the central piece of symbolic furniture in his famous painting. However, Jesus' table is nothing like Michaelangelo's exaggerated rectangle, with its hierarchy of places designed for a hierarchically structured church building, in support of an empire religion. The only space in that kind of religion for the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind – and whoever in our time is considered unclean, outcast, despised, unworthy – is to be down the back or out of sight altogether.

Our church building was constructed as recently as the late 1950s, and yet it is unmistakably medieval in its shape and layout, reflecting the religion of empire, not of Jesus. And though in the late 1980s we managed to prise the Altar-Table away from the east wall, nevertheless our nave Altar is still a Michaelangelo-rectangle, towards which we all face east in our rigid lines.

But Jesus' table is equal sided: a table around which all persons are equally gathered, a table at which angels are entertained, whether we know it or not,⁶ making a defiant stand against the world's relentless distinction-making, then and now.

The real meaning of the dialogue in today's gospel is not mere popular wisdom about how to advance one's chances with the social dynamics in a shame culture.⁷ 'Oh look, if I sit down the back someone might come along and 'upgrade' me to Business Class'. Jesus' point is that there are in fact no 'places of honour' at his table: because all are as one at this his workbench of the new creation. "We who are many are one body; for we all share in the one bread".

For this reason, our spiritual renewal as disciples requires the re-ordering of our still-medieval-shaped building, the reshaping of our Altar-Table, and the way we arrange ourselves around it.

vicar@stjohnscamberwell.org.au

³ Luke 14:7

⁴ Luke 14:11

⁵ Luke 9:51

⁶ Hebrews 13:2

⁷ Proverbs 25:6-7