

possessions & discipleship

a sermon preached on the

sixteenth sunday after pentecost

4 September 2016

at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Psalm 139, Philemon 1-25, Luke 14:25-35

This month's edition of *TMA* includes two articles reporting on recent lectures in Melbourne on discipleship and sexuality.¹ In what's reported, one lecture-giver takes no position as to whether Christian teaching allows for same-sex persons to embody their attraction. The other – who describes himself as a 'gay celibate Anglican', speaking to the 'party faithful' in Melbourne's wealthy eastern suburbs – insists that celibacy is the *only* option for same-sex attracted persons. It is firmly insisted that this is the only way in which such a person can be faithful to the bible and Christian teaching.

Lest you think this is going to be a sermon about sexuality, in fact I have to admit that I'm feeling more than a little fed up with this whole business. Scholarly investigation as well as synodical debate has been going on for many decades now – someone with a better grasp than me of recent church history could say exactly how many. So I find myself having lost patience altogether with the churches. Why on earth are the pages of our diocesan paper still occupied with this? Why wasn't this matter settled long ago? On the other hand, why are we silent about the despicable purging which has taken place? Just how many people need to abandon the churches before we pay any attention? For how long will we church-insiders put up with the endless inane gabbling on about how we all have to be 'mission-facing' – whatever that jargon means – while we apparently fail to notice that our pseudo-official position on same-sex attraction is a mission disaster of monumental proportions?

But I'm fed up not only because of our pastoral poison, and the sheer stupidity of our mission catastrophe. What should really concern us, I have come see, is the way in which sexual attraction has been constructed by religious conservatives as *the* determinant of biblical faithfulness. Show me where the bible makes *this* the benchmark of discipleship faithfulness!

In that *TMA* article it is claimed that same-sex attracted persons are called to "live out a very difficult vocation", and that the only way in which this can be accomplished is to not have sex. What utter rubbish! And how despicable. Do we hear religious conservatives saying that persons who enjoy having significant material possessions and assets are called to live out a very difficult vocation; and that the *only way* in which that can be done is to not have them, to give them all away. Certainly not in the wealthy eastern suburbs!

But look, that is precisely what today's gospel does in fact say. "None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up your possessions".² A person attempting to be a disciple without giving away all their possessions would be as useless as salt that has lost its taste.³ A person who does not subordinate their father and mother, wife and children, sisters and brothers, yes, and even life itself, cannot be Christ's disciple.⁴ Later in Luke's gospel Jesus is even more blunt.⁵

So if we're going to have supposed biblical literalism, then let us be consistent!

But I suspect this isn't about the Bible at all. Could it be that this reduction of 'biblical faithfulness' to unreasonable rules for same-sex attracted persons is actually a con, nothing other than a massive avoidance, a dishonest way of brutally abusing a minority, for a second time, in order simply to manipulate power in the churches? Is this really just about old-

¹ Mark Brolly reporting on a lecture by Wesley Hill, 'A hard road on sexuality is the right road: US scholar'; Muriel Porter reporting on a lecture by Gregory Seach, 'The Church in a muddle about sex, says theologian', *TMA*, September 2016, p4.

² Luke 14:33

³ Luke 14:35

⁴ Luke 14:26

⁵ Luke 18:25

fashioned raw power? For while we place this absurd literalist yoke around the necks of same-sex attracted persons, we give ourselves permission to turn a blind eye to our utter unfaithfulness with regard to our possessions. This diocese is presently maintaining a pseudo ‘peace’ by insisting on one discipleship standard for same-sex attracted persons, allowing the rest of us to smugly pontificate, avoiding Jesus’ standards regarding our wealth and possessions.

It’s simply wrong to claim that ‘biblical faithfulness’ for a same-sex attracted person *requires* abstinence from sex; in the same way that it’s clearly wrong to insist that ‘biblical faithfulness’ for persons with possessions *requires* giving them all way.

So let us get beneath the surface, to the deeper demands of Jesus’ teaching. Here we find that there are neither same-sex attracted persons, nor wealthy persons – nor male nor female, nor Jew nor Greek, nor any other distinction. We find at this deeper level that *all of us* are living out a ‘very difficult calling’ – regardless of any superficial distinction.

As always, literalism – or, we might say the self-justifying self-interest that fuels it – is the great destroyer of Christian faith and community. For ‘possessions’ does not merely mean dollars, or houses, or any other things. ‘Possessions’ means not so much the things we have; as *the things that have us*. That can be money and property and things – and if so, then dis-possession is the gospel’s emphatic call. But we can be possessed by anything and everything. It is true that a same-sex person can be possessed by their drive for sex. It’s equally true that a different-sex person can be possessed by their drive for sex – as we know to be tragically the case from the statistics on the appalling abuse within marriage!

Indeed, we can be possessed in a great many ways: by our race or ethnicity; by our national identity; by our reputation and our image; by the institutions we identify with and define ourselves by; by our buildings and the things in them which we give more importance than Jesus. We can be possessed by our need to be liked and valued, or successful, or creative, or by our need to be knowledgeable, or law-abiding, or fun and entertaining, or in charge, or even by our need to avoid conflict.

All these things – good in themselves – can possess us. I wonder, what possesses you? I have been reflecting on what possesses me. What possesses us as parish, or as each of the Sunday congregations here?

The gospel touches us at precisely this place within us, and ministers to our healing and wholeness. Whatever it is that has possessed us, must be relinquished – if we are to be Jesus’ disciple. Whatever has possessed us, is a cross that we must carry, in order to follow Jesus.⁶

To see this is to see that in Christ all of us together are children of the one heavenly father and mother, all undergoing the ‘difficult vocation’ of honestly facing up to that which possesses us, and which must be relinquished, so that we may be Jesus’ disciples. “Let anyone with ears to hear listen!”⁷

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⁶ Luke 14:27

⁷ Luke 14:35b