

learning to see

a sermon preached on the
seventh sunday after pentecost

3 July 2016

at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Isaiah 66:10-14, Psalm 66:1-8, Galatians 6:7-18, Luke 10:1-12, 17-24

Today at 3pm we baptise Vinson. We baptise Vinson: it is the community of faith that baptises. Today's gospel offers a commentary on the commissioning which is given to Vinson, and to to all the baptised: "Confess Christ crucified, proclaim his resurrection, look for his coming in glory".¹ The Lord sends all the baptised out – 'into the harvest' – with the deceptively simple message: "And say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you'".² This is the meaning of the task of the disciple, of all the baptised: we are to make known the reality and the tangible presence of the kingdom of God. We are to tell even those who do not welcome us: 'The kingdom of God is fulfilled, here and now!' as the Greek more literally declares.³

And what we notice in Luke's gospel especially is that this fulfilment of the Kingdom of God requires our participation. It isn't merely something 'Jesus does for us' – a shocking distortion so tragically widespread. The seventy are *participants* in the kingdom of God. And they are required to take significant risk: sent like lambs into the midst of wolves.⁴ They are required to let go of all their baggage and trust in the grace of God: carry no purse, no bag, no sandals.⁵ Even in the face of hostility they are to proclaim 'Peace'.⁶ They are not to be spiritual tourists or sightseers: Do not move about from house to house.⁷

I wonder... In what ways are we being invited to let go of our securities, to take the risk of being among wolves, what baggage we are being invited to leave behind?

Well, we see that the seventy, having taken the risk, "returned with joy, saying, 'Lord, in your name the demons submitted to us'".⁸ This might sound a bit like modern 'performance indicator' language. And Jesus does say, "I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning".⁹ Yes, here's the great 'result'! But I think the lynchpin to this entire episode is contained in verse 20: "Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven".¹⁰ Let me explain why I think this saying is the key.

In Luke's gospel, especially, Jesus is intensely interested in *how people respond*. We read last week of some of the ways that thwart our positive response to Jesus' invitation to take up the cross of ourselves – to go on the way to Jerusalem, which is a symbol for the decision to undergo the necessary separation from all collective identity, in order to receive our true identity in Christ. And again today the gospel is interested in this true identity in Christ. What we find today is a Jesus who is teaching his disciples how to look at the world.

How do we learn to see? Through the eyes of *another*. The first 'other' is, generally, our mother of course – but very soon becomes father, step-parents, siblings, grandparents, schoolmates, workmates, and, eventually, the entire globalised internet-connected human family. Our desire is learned from the desire of others: what others desire, we desire.

¹ From the rite of Holy Baptism, *A Prayer Book for Australia*, Sydney: Broughton Books, 1995, p70.

² Luke 10:9

³ Luke 10:10-11 Gk: *ἠγγικεν* *éngiken* means fulfillment, the fulfilling of the eschatological vision

⁴ Luke 10:3

⁵ Luke 10:4

⁶ Luke 10:5

⁷ Luke 10:7

⁸ Luke 10:17

⁹ Luke 10:18

¹⁰ Luke 10:20

The massaging of our desire is big business. Just reflect on the fact that last year \$12billion was spent in Australia on the advertising industry. \$12billion could build a lot of schools and hospitals. But the Ad industry claims that from the \$12 billion in expenditure it generated \$40billion worth of business.¹¹ So the assumption is that without this massive massaging of desire – which produces consumption not actually needed but allegedly ‘good for the economy’ – the economy would collapse. Everything is made real – and supposedly essential – by the construction and massaging of desire. Everything is given value by our desire – which is shaped by our competitive, rivalistic, consumption-addicted culture. How does this shape us? “The ‘self’ becomes an incarnation of that desire, jostling for security, reputation, goodness, success”.¹² Thomas Merton called this state of affairs a ‘collective hypnosis’.

Returning to today’s gospel, we find that Jesus’ attention is concentrated on his disciples’ reactions. They are excited about their *accomplishments* – their supposed ‘spiritual KPIs’. Jesus does see the larger picture – that the reign of Satan is falling, because the seventy have taken the risk of abandoning themselves to the Jerusalem way. But he rebukes them for their excitement over results. Why?

I have come to think that it’s because he recognises that what they desire is the same desire as the rivalistic and competitive world around them. He sees the collective hypnosis: that they want ‘accomplishments’; and, more crucially, they want ‘victory’. This is the rivalistic desire they have learned from looking at others.

No, Jesus declares. Do not rejoice at this. You are seeing the world incorrectly: through the lens of the collective hypnosis. This is *not* the kingdom of God. This is *not* the way of Christ crucified. This is *not* resurrection life. This is *not* God’s glory. You are desiring the wrong thing altogether!

Rejoice, instead, “that your names are written in heaven”. That is to say, Jesus wants them to learn to see through different eyes – the eyes of ‘heaven’. “We are talking about learning how to be given our desire through the eyes of another... [and that] other is Jesus, the Word of God”.¹³

When we do see the world through the eyes of this non-rivalistic, non-violent, forgiving Other, then we do not see ‘victory’ or even accomplishment. Rather, what we see is union with God and all persons. ‘Heaven’ is the condition in which there is no competition, no rivalry, no scapegoating, no sacred violence; but only the utterly gratuitous, non-rivalistic, embracing one-ness. If we ‘sow to the Spirit’, in the language of Paul, we will reap ‘eternal life from the Spirit’.¹⁴

Finally, it is evident that these things have always been concealed from the ‘wise and intelligent’ – and the wealthy and the powerful and controlling and war mongering and scapegoating and rivalistic – and Jesus even thanks the ‘Lord of heaven and earth’ that this is so!¹⁵ For these things are revealed only to ‘infants’. That is, to those whose desire is no longer informed by ‘the world’, and who have learned to see the world through the eyes of the non-rivalistic forgiving victim. Blessed indeed are the eyes that have learned *to see!*¹⁶

In baptism we enter into this life-long process of *learning to see* through the eyes of Jesus. At the Eucharist we are nourished and strengthened in this life-long process: learning to see ourselves at the broken bread, the blood poured out, for the life of the world.

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¹¹ ‘Advertising \$40b boost to economy’, SBS, 15 June 2016, <http://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/2016/06/15/advertising-40b-boost-economy-report>

¹² James Alison, *On Being Liked*, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2003, p1.

¹³ James Alison, p1.

¹⁴ Galatians 6:8

¹⁵ Luke 10:21

¹⁶ Luke 10:23