

cure of souls
a sermon preached on the feast of
The Reign of Christ
20 November 2016
at
st john's
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
by fr david moore, vicar

the lections: Jeremiah 23:1-6, Colossians 1:11-20, Luke 23:33-43

NB: This sermon constitutes part 4 of the vicar's annual report, delivered at 10am on Sunday 20 November.
Parts 1, 2,3 & 5 were included in the 2016 Annual Reports document.

'You having been nominated to the Cure of Souls.'
(Archbishop's Licence)

If you've called by my office in the parish centre, you may have noticed on the wall my Licence from the Archbishop. I keep this old fashioned document there to remind me of the Archbishop's charge to me. When all the archaic Elizabethanesque legalese is pared away, the vicar's task is described in this one phrase: "the Cure of Souls".

Isn't that amazing economy!

This is why I am in fact the 'curate'. And those who are in formation – Kuncoro, and Emily and Richard, and others before them, and others who will follow them – are designated as 'assistant curates' because they assist the 'Cure of Souls'. That's all! And that's enough!

So I am reminding myself that I'm here for the *cure of souls*. That is what I have spent the best part of my adult life committed to. It's what I promised before the Archbishop of Perth at my ordination. It's what I undertook to give my life to at each of my commissionings in the three parishes I have served as 'incumbent'. It's what I have reaffirmed at the Holy Week Chrism Mass before the bishops of Perth, Christchurch, and Melbourne. And that strange old-fashioned document on my office wall reminds me daily – just in case I forget!

So what does it mean to be the 'Cure of Souls'? And why am I talking about myself? Actually, I'm not talking about myself, as I hope becomes clear now.

A Christian theology of ministry holds in dynamic tension two truths: I am an *ordained priest*; and you are the *priesthood of all believers*. Both statements are true. It's why I keep talking about a community gathered equally around an equal-sided Table; and why that symbol is so important for our mission.

So all of us, therefore, are in the business of the *cure of souls*. It's crucial to distinguish between essential and secondary; between centre and periphery. Being *cure of souls* is our 'core business': everything else is peripheral. Indeed, it's our only *essential* business!

While I have been reflecting on these things, I've remembered my first week as your 'Cure of Souls'. I've included in the printed text of this part of my annual report a copy of the first sermon I preached as your vicar. As a kind of 'vision statement' for the Cure of Souls, you may find it of interest.

Well on this feast day, at liturgical year's end, we present ourselves before the cross of Christ, before the Great Cure of Souls completing his work. We are reminded again that – in spite of our tendency to claim credit for ourselves – we are discovering ourselves as those who are *sought out by Jesus*. Even from the cross, Jesus is still seeking us out in prayer.¹

As he prays for us from the cross, our fears, anxieties, resistances are revealed.² And it is precisely through such revealing of the truth about ourselves that our souls are in fact being 'cured'!³

¹ Luke 23:34

² Luke 23:35,37,39

³ Luke 23:43

And it is gradually dawning on us that the one who reigns is none other than the one who consents to the way down, the path of descent, self-emptying. The one who ‘reigns’, in St Paul’s image, is the one who reconciles “in his fleshly body through death”.⁴ The soul is cured – ‘saved’ if you prefer – by dying to all egoic identity and grasping: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit”.⁵ It is enough!

Of course, in each of us there is a ‘deriding’ voice: ‘Save yourself and us!’⁶ We resist the path of descent, preferring superficial and illusory claims to power, pseudo-kingdoms to rescue us from the unwanted feelings of littleness, failure, irrelevance, demise, and of course whatever shame we may be carrying. We can’t relax into being disciples called into God’s future, because we’re anxious and fearful about our reputations, and the future, and the institution.⁷

This anxiety fuels our hoping that people will come flocking ‘back’ to church. The word ‘back’ reveals a regressive instinct; just as that slogan ‘make America great again’ has so graphically revealed the backwards-looking fear gripping that country. This regressive instinct, this going backwards, exposes our captivity to the deadly illusion of a past-tense imagined greatness or security – so that we don’t have to feel what it feels like to be the ‘little flock’,⁸ not knowing where the Spirit may lead us.

But Jesus simply invites us to undergo his way. He sees and knows our fears, anxieties and resistances. Undeterred by the locked doors of our hearts, he offers no ‘blueprint’ other than following in his way. And he says our willingness – our desire,⁹ our naked intent to go this way – is enough for the cure of souls. It *is* enough!

The simplicity of Jesus’ invitation – scandalises all of us, but is alone the way of ‘paradise’,¹⁰ the way of reconciliation, fullness, and completion.¹¹ It is *enough*!

Finally, and crucially, we cannot in good faith expect, or invite, others to join us, unless we ourselves are willing to give ourselves over to this way,¹² to complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions in our own bodies.¹³

So this is why I am here, with you: for the cure of souls. I’m here to give myself over to this way. And I’m here to accompany *you* on this way.

I don’t claim that it’s easy; only that it *is* the Christian evangellion. In John Taylor’s wonderful image: this is ‘the church giving itself to the Spirit’.

And we are here as the priesthood of all believers to *undergo this way together*, as living embodiments of the Paschal Mystery – *in order that we may grow as trusted and wise soul-guides*, so that we may safely accompany those others to whom the Spirit sends us.

And that’s enough!

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⁴ Colossians 1:22

⁵ Luke 23:46

⁶ Luke 23:39

⁷ Luke 23:37

⁸ Luke 12:32

⁹ Luke 23:42

¹⁰ Luke 23:43

¹¹ Colossians 1:19, 20, 28

¹² Luke 11:52

¹³ Colossians 1:24