

go inside!
a sermon preached on
ash wednesday

5 March 2014

at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Joel 2:1-2,12-17, Psalm 51:1-17, Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

“Whenever you pray, go into your room”. The NRSV lets down the English speaker here. Hidden room – that’s literally what the Greek texts says.¹ But the Aramaic word which Jesus would have spoken more precisely means a ‘closet’² – on this occasion the King James is right on the mark. Go into your closet! “And your Father who sees in secret will reward you”.³

This ‘closet’ is an *inner reality*, hidden – which can only be gestured towards in the language of symbols. The closet, the hidden room, the secret place, is functionally equivalent to the modern psychological discovery of the objective psyche. Actually, this is not wholly a discovery of modern psychological studies – for the great spiritual teachers have long known and spoken about this. And as they have long known, now confirmed by science, by far the majority of what we are is in fact hidden.

We need to be very clear that we are not invited into this hidden space in order to please, or appease, anyone – certainly not angry, vengeful or just old-fashioned jealous deities. That may have often been the religion of the churches – but it is certainly not the religion of Jesus the Christ.

Also, the ‘reward’ for entering this hidden space is not prosperity, nor the favouritism of religious tribalism. Rather, the reward is that the hidden and saving truth will be revealed. Without doubt, this is a liberation – and because of that, an *evangelion*.

Furthermore, religious practices do not take us out of the world and its complexities – contrary to public opinion, and some pious discourse. In the ‘closet’ – when honestly entered into – everything of ‘the world’ is fully present. Indeed, more than just present, we might say supra-present – present in its greatest intensity.

Why is this important? And what can be the individual Christian’s contribution in this complex world?

Well, as anyone can observe, the whole globalised world is now spiritually drowning in a tsunami of mass-minded unconsciousness – ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ ‘success’, ‘branding’, and ‘market share’ the dominant ‘lingua franca’ in church and state alike. This renders us impotent in the face of the great matters pressing upon us. Churches, cities, corporations, nations are equally incapable of solving the myriad of complex problems besetting us – in spite of all our smart phones, our higher education, our increasingly burdensome possessions and addictive consuming, our GDP, our supposedly secure national borders.

But it is precisely in this bewildering and seemingly hopeless milieu that every single individual, however, is able to accomplish – with some effort, time and commitment, of course – the deliberate and conscious withdrawal from mass minded noise and chatter, personal and collective. And this is precisely Ash Wednesday’s invitation.

Go inside! Go into your closet, shut the door, leave behind mass-mindedness, distraction, chatter, noise, superficiality, triviality – and all projections. We cannot enter the closet – which is in fact Eternity – if we will not face our own unconscious life. By silence and withdrawal our fearsome inner energies are confined, generating the pressure necessary for development. Go inside!

This sheds clarifying light on the practice of prayer, which is so prone to being conscripted into ego-centric, self-preoccupied purposes – Lord, we just want this, just give us that. Jesus’ breakthrough discovery

¹ Matthew 6:6 Greek: *tameion tameion*

² Aramaic: *tawānā* Douglas-Klotz N, *The Hidden Gospel: Decoding the Spiritual Message of the Aramaic Jesus*, Wheaton: Quest Books, 2001, pp61-62

³ Matthew 6:6b

is that each and every person has such a closet – that every person is their own high priest. The temple, Jesus reveals, is within. Each person must enter their own ‘holy of holies’.

And this also sheds a helpful light also on the call to fasting. If we can get past the literalism with which we might associate this term, then it is possible to see a deeper meaning. By many and varied means – over-consuming, talking, reading, entertainment, web-surfing, Facebooking and tweeting, to name some obvious means – we attempt to evade the suffering we are bound to encounter in silence, in our inner chamber. But this inner suffering is purposeful, redemptive, creative, transformative – as Jesus’ experience bears witness. All distraction is nothing other than an evasion of the redemptive purpose of our suffering, and simply causes a tragic leakage of the vital inner energies, reducing the necessary inner pressure – thwarting transformation.

Clearly this ‘closet’ is not child’s play! This is anything but the prosperity doctrine and the escapism of which Christianity may be suspected. Rather, it is more like a crucible, a furnace, a pressure cooker! In fact, more like Jesus’ experience of the fierce testing in the wilderness – by which, we recall, he is initiated into the mystery of the Kingdom of God.⁴ What do we think would have happened had Jesus been airlifted out of the desert in the middle of the first temptation?

Nothing may truly be called ‘evangelical’ except that which emerges from this closet – this confined and secret crucible of inner reality. Indeed, anything that does not emerge from the closet is mere token, empty religious phrases, counterfeit, piety practiced before others, to be seen by others – which receives its reward.⁵

Armed with this insight, then, ‘prayer’ and ‘fasting’ and ‘almsgiving’ constitute the complete re-ordering of everything, beginning interiorly. All the future, the ‘Father’s reward’ – our own as individuals, and as species and planet – will come from this hidden place. Whatever conflicts and problems we hope to surmount and solve, exteriorly, must first be accomplished within the individual hidden chamber. This is the new dispensation, the good news, enfleshed by Jesus the Christ. There can be no spiritual manifesto, which we know as ‘the beatitudes’, except by Jesus first going into his closet.

Little wonder Jesus sounds such a note of warning about all external acts of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving⁶ – and I would add, all acts of mission and evangelism. External acts *will* follow, of course – authentic ones – from that which is first accomplished in the hidden chamber of the individual soul.

By way of a smudged ashen sign, then, Lent beckons: Go inside!

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⁴Matthew 4:1-11

⁵Matthew 6:1,2,5

⁶Matthew 6:2,5,16