

shirt of flame

a sermon preached on

Palm Sunday

13 April 2014

at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

by fr david moore, vicar

the lections: Matthew 21:1-11, Isaiah 50:4-9, Psalm 31, Matthew 26:14 – 28:66

Who can bear the enormity of the evangel of Holy Week? Who can stomach what is set before us as ‘the way to life’? The way to find life is to lose it?¹ The way up is the way down?² The only answer to the world’s grasping at power is to give no answer?³

the mystery of the cross does gleam,
where the creator of flesh, in the flesh,
by the cross-bar is hung.⁴

“[The] little point of nothingness and of *absolute poverty* [at the centre of our being] is the pure glory of God in us.”⁵

Who can stomach it! Certainly not the massminded crowd which was possessed by cheering adulation at one end of the week⁶ – yet by the other end of the week was possessed with murderous intent.⁷ In spite of what I know, something in me objects – in the strongest possible terms – against this outrageous torment:

Who then devised the torment? Love.
Love is the unfamiliar Name
Behind the hands that wove
The intolerable shirt of flame
Which human power cannot remove.
We only live, only suspire
Consumed by either fire or fire.⁸

My mind cries out against this ‘intolerable shirt of flame’. It is indeed a ‘torment’! I would do anything to be rid of it. Heaven knows, I’d rather be a happy unconscious shopper or holiday-maker than endure this fiery garment!

Yet... and yet what is impossible – in terms of the “fantasies of our own mind and the brutalities of our own will” – is astonishingly and miraculously possible to that part of our essential nature which is never at our disposal, the Nothingness which is the centre of our being.⁹

Thomas Merton, Venantius Fortunatus, and T S Eliot have merely restated precisely the same ancient biblical truth – which unconscious massmindedness and triumphalist Christendom alike object to. Namely, we *will* indeed be called to drink the cup of Nothingness.¹⁰

We only live, only suspire
Consumed by either fire or fire.

¹ Matthew 11:39 and parallels

² “He descended to the dead”, The ‘Apostles Creed’, **A Prayer Book for Australia**, Sydney: Broughton, p59.

³ Matthew 26:63, 27:14

⁴ From the hymn ‘Vexilla regis prodeunt’ by Venantius Fortunatus, 530 – 600/609 CE, Bishop of Poitiers

⁵ Thomas Merton, **Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander**

⁶ Matthew 21:9

⁷ Matthew 27:22-23

⁸ T S Eliot, ‘Little Gidding’, in **Four Quartets**, London: Faber & Faber, 1944, p42.

⁹ Thomas Merton

¹⁰ Matthew 20:23-28

Holy Week is the gift that recalls us to the fact that fire is not an option. However to drink it unconsciously will simply destroy us. We are either consumed by the fire of the necessary destruction of our brute will to power – with all its anxious and grasping commitment to money, possessions, supposedly secure borders, and control. Or we are consumed by the fire that transforms the narrowness of our finite ego consciousness – in the tradition’s technical jargon, into resurrection life.

Who then devised the torment of this intolerable shirt of flame?

Love! The “little point of nothingness and *of absolute poverty* [which the consuming fire reveals] is the pure glory of God in us... It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven.”¹¹ What we see in the pattern of the Christ is precisely this: Love reveals in the one thus consumed by fire the greatest mystery of all: love!

Attending deeply to the ritual actions of Holy Week does not consist in play-acting a historical melodrama. Rather, it is the transformative proclamation that Love – the fiery gate of heaven – is a work to be undertaken everywhere, here and now, in you and me. We only live consumed by fire.

I pray that we may all willingly, consciously, and joyfully put on the intolerable shirt of flame of this sacred Holy Week. And, being thus consumed by its fire, may ourselves become increasingly the fire of the unfamiliar name of Love.

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