

Diocese of Auckland Ordination Sermon
Saturday 26 November 2023

Isaiah 42.1-7, 2 Corinthians 4.1-7, John 12.20-26

The Rev'd Brenda Rockell

It is always such a lovely experience, to come and be in this Cathedral, surrounded by glorious, patterned light, uplifted by incredible music, speaking and singing good words of prayer that have echoed through the centuries. On this wonderful occasion, here in the heart of our Diocese, we proclaim the "light of God's glory in the face of Jesus Christ," giving thanks with joy, drawing on all the beauty of our tradition. We come to lay hands on people who are giving themselves over to this proclamation. By God's grace, they will live their whole lives as a testament to the light, to the glory that has captured their hearts.

There is also another, less obviously beautiful, strand woven into our liturgy today. It is held in words like "lost and lonely," "those in need," and "Christ's prophetic work." Those being ordained priest will be challenged to "be what they proclaim" – to take their place among those "poor, troubled, powerless and persecuted," whom Jesus named as blessed. Our intercessions this morning will recall us to the distress and suffering in our world. This darker strand will also be made visible for us when the bread of Christ's body is broken, and we drink the blood of his sacrifice from the chalice.

Glory doesn't always look and sound beautiful. Glory is often hidden and troubling. Light sometimes looks like darkness. *Leadership should look like servanthood, which can seem like weakness, insufficiency, failure, suffering and even death.*

St. Paul wrote of people whose minds are 'blinded' to the gospel of Christ. For them, the gospel is 'veiled' by the 'god of this world.' There is a power at work in our world that seduces us to see glory only in fame, celebrity and success. But if we can only find God's image in what we think of as beautiful, we will never see God imaged in Christ on the cross.

By the same token, those who have offered their lives to serve Christ in the Church will be invisible to the "important" folk of the world.

There was a time when to kneel in this place and receive the prayers to be made deacon or priest was go *with the grain* of respectability and status. To be ordained was to carry the trust not only of those who filled the churches on Sundays, but of our wider society. Our Christian faith was seen, even by those who didn't share it, as being something that made us reasonable and decent. The Church spoke with moral authority and was heard with respect in the places of political power.

That time has largely gone.

This is partly the Church's own fault. The Church cannot say with St. Paul that we have consistently "renounced the shameful things that one hides," and "refused to practice cunning or to falsify God's word." That is, Christian churches have at times betrayed the trust that we once held, through practices of abuse, exclusion, manipulation and grasping for people's money.

But that is only part of the story. Because even where the Church is genuinely truthful, generous, humble and compassionate, *most people no longer assume that we have anything of any spiritual importance to say. And insofar as we continue to serve Christ crucified and risen, this is to be expected.*

In a world where glory means winning, in a world where beauty comes at the sharp end of a Botox needle, in a world where people imagine a trillion-dollar space programme is going to save us all, Christ crucified...well, that looks like losing, that looks like ugliness, that looks like death and shame. And Christ risen? Well, that's the kind of foolishness you get from a fairy-tale religion.

Those who offer their lives in service to this Christ will increasingly come to seem *ignorant and disreputable*, occasioning a quick change of subject when they give a truthful answer to the question "and what do you do?"

But that's okay. We're in good company. And none of this needs to diminish our joy if we understand it as part of our calling.

When the Greeks worshipping at the festival told Philip that they wanted to see Jesus, I wonder if Philip secretly thought – "this is it! This is where we go global!" But when Jesus hears about his new would-be-fans, his rather deflating response is: "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."

To be "glorified," in Jesus' framing of reality, is not about going larger, and increasing your audience. *For Jesus, to be glorified is to die.*

To go into the earth and break apart so that something new can grow and bear the fruit that a single grain alone can't produce. "Whoever serves me must follow me," Jesus says. Which means willingness to live out a way of being that lets go of power and control, lets go of status and security, lets go of being in the centre, esteemed, and safe.

The testimony of our faith is that when you embrace something challenging and painful and disturbing for long enough, when you walk in, down, and through a cave of not knowing, of darkness and confusion, of no answers and heavy heartedness, something shifts. Eventually, you end up out the other side, blinking in the sunlight. And then, if you have walked that journey, and can witness honestly both to the sorrow and to the resurrection joy beyond, *you discover some of the other hidden, humble people of the world who recognise true religion when they see it. These are the ones who will join with you to build a community of love and healing in this hurting world.*

Who can see the glory of Christ? Those whose sufferings, or whose longing, or whose need or weakness or whose hunger, have ripped the veil away so that they can see the glory *in both the suffering **and** the transfigured face of Christ.* Those whose experience has given them the wisdom to realise that repentance and conversion aren't offensive impositions, but necessary daily practices for recovery and healing. Those who know in their bones that servanthood is the only true way to exercise power in this violent world.

And what will they look like, these beloved communities of wounded healers? They will look like Isaiah's servant. They won't get their way by shouting and striving. They will nurture, rather than breaking, the bruised and "dimly burning" wicks. Their light will look like faithfully serving the demands of love and justice, releasing those who are held in bondage of any kind – whether to false and distorted beliefs, bondage to poverty, oppression or cruelty, bondage to fear and stubborn hate.

In a post-Christendom world, we must all discover how to live the gospel message anew, *and we can expect for it to look like genuine spiritual food only to those who are starving.*

What that means for us as an institution, in an increasingly uncomprehending society, is a question we must grapple with. At the least it means embracing our poverty and our smallness, and our orientation to those the world neglects. Storyteller Martin Shaw, a recent convert to Christianity, calls us to "remember our own myths," and "dig into the dark wonder of it all. Not the stuff of empire and conquest, not the mega-churches and donation box, but the sheer radical eccentricity of [our] stories, the quiet devastation of love that circles the Beatitudes...the voluntary abdication of consumer-friendly outcomes...that's a rebel energy these days, a whispered thing,"¹ he says.

Are we willing to enter our own abyss in the hope of resurrection?

¹ Martin Shaw, "A God with a Dog in the Race: Seeking a Liturgy of the Wild (Part 32)" from his Substack blog *The House of Beasts and Vines*, <https://substack.com/inbox/post/138885219>.

Be encouraged. There are many who faithfully answer a daily “yes” to this question. We trust that God has called these particular ones here today to live as servants of this gospel in their communities. They have been discerned, trained and equipped for the task, and today we will pray for God’s Spirit to anoint them with the grace they need for the road ahead. They will hold this treasure in the clay jars of their humanity. In their weakness, in their times of not knowing what to do, in their wrestling, in their washing of feet, and in their tears they will manifest God’s glory *just as fully* as when they preside at the altar or organise a successful ministry programme or preach a life-changing sermon.

May the same God who said “let light shine out of darkness” shine in all our hearts, and may we know that whether we walk a dark and hidden road or a sunny and easy one, there is joy to be found in both these paths, and the light of God’s glory will shine through the service we offer in love.