

## Advent 2011 ~ Hope: Discipleship as living the future

Eph.4:17-24, Rev.21:1-6a; 5:1-2; Matt.28:16-20

This week we continue in our Advent series where we have been looking at the church as a worshipping, witnessing community of *disciples*, who wait *expectantly* in *hope* for the immanent return of their master – the crucified, risen and ascended Jesus the Christ.

This ‘watchfulness’ as Mark calls it,<sup>1</sup> this ‘active waiting’, to which Jesus’ disciples are called, takes place within the context of a world that – as we heard from John’s revelation today – desperately needs the transforming power of the Gospel to make *all* things new.<sup>2</sup>

While John’s vision is one of the *future* – that time when Christ, the first and the last,<sup>3</sup> *will* renew all things – our wonderful reading from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians calls us to live as such a people *now*. As we look to the future in Jesus’ present absence, *we* are to make him present through *how we live together*; we are, in a manner of speaking, to *incarnate* Jesus, to give him flesh and bones in this world, as he incarnated the fullness of God. We are to be (as Paul puts it just previously in his letter), the *body of Christ*.<sup>4</sup>

This is not a call for us to become somehow deified. Clearly Christ’s embodying of God is of a different order than ours. But it *is* a call for us to take living in this world seriously even while we wait for the new heaven and the new earth which is to come.<sup>5</sup> It is the church, the new *ecclesia*, the “called out” or “set aside ones”, who constitute “the fullness of him who fills all in all”. Just as the *ecclesia* in ancient Athens exercised their rule of the *polis*, so the *ecclesia* of Christ exercise the dominion of God upon the earth.<sup>6</sup>

How do we do this? According to Paul it happens when together we are connected to the ascended Jesus by his Spirit. He writes:

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<sup>1</sup> Mk.13:32–37.

<sup>2</sup> Rev.21:5.

<sup>3</sup> Rev.21:6a.

<sup>4</sup> Eph.4:15-16.

<sup>5</sup> Rev.21:1.

<sup>6</sup> Eph.1:22-23; 4:10.

There is one *body* and one *Spirit*, just as you were called to the one *hope* of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.<sup>7</sup>

... Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given me ... so that through the *church* the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.<sup>8</sup>

Paul goes on to “affirm and insist”<sup>9</sup> on how this high calling is worked out. He says we are to be a people who *renounce* the ways of our dominant culture, who no longer live in the “futility” of our culturally determined mind-sets – “darkened in our understanding and alienated from the life of God.” ... “This is not the way you learned Christ!” he exclaims, “For surely you have heard about him and were taught *in* him – as the truth *is in* Jesus”<sup>10</sup> The expression “to learn Christ” (*emathete tou Christou*), implies what the rest of the sentence makes clear. To know Christ is more than receiving instruction, though that is included. It is to learn by full immersion; it is to *be like*, to learn in such a way as to become a devotee, a disciple.

And so Paul calls us out of ignorance and hardness of heart, he calls us to put away our former way of life, deluded as it was by false desires, and to “clothe [ourselves] with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and *holiness*”.<sup>11</sup>

Paul goes on in his letter to give the principles upon which such a people live. The fundamental principle he insists, is that we be “*subject* to one another” – men and women, children and parents, bosses and workers – we are to be subject to one another, “out of reverence to Christ.”<sup>12</sup> The church is to be a place of humility, self-sacrifice and holiness because it is to be a place where Christ is known, a place where, as “imitators of God”, each offers themselves

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<sup>7</sup> Eph.4:4 f.f.

<sup>8</sup> Eph.3:7-10.

<sup>9</sup> Eph.4:17.

<sup>10</sup> Eph.4:20-21.

<sup>11</sup> Eph.5:24.

<sup>12</sup> Eph.5:21.

up to the other as Christ “gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God”.<sup>13</sup>

[This is challenging reading. If you haven’t read this part of scripture lately I urge you to do so this week.<sup>14</sup>]

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Paul’s admonitions are inspiring. Yet at the same time our experience teaches us that the church is faced with *distractions*, things that weigh us down, things which debilitate us in our witness. If we are to be disciples of Jesus, we need to repent of these distractions. As well as those that Paul lists in Ephesians, over the last three weeks we have already identified other obstacles to effective discipleship, namely: unbelief, individualism and false understandings of worship.

In this last sermon in the series I want suggest one more distraction which I believe to be particularly unhelpful; that of ‘religious experience’. And I want to suggest that this distraction is related to a deeper one – that of *denial*.

As I noted last week, as citizens of the globe as well as our nation, we face a growing number of crises which seem to lead inexorably to despair. I won’t catalogue these again since we are all too painfully aware of them. In general terms these are issues to do with the global economy and our natural environment.

Recently, the international news has been full of comment and latest developments in the so called “Eurozone crisis”. Coverage seems to have eclipsed climate change as our nightmare to the point where the current post-Kyoto negotiations in Durban have been barely reported. Bizarrely, the precarious global economic crisis brings a kind of ‘cold comfort’. Seemingly so far away, yet also so close, it almost helps us to sleep better (especially if we don’t have a stock portfolio), since going broke is one thing but the choking of life from our planet is of quite another order of concern. We simply don’t have headroom to think about the end of life as we know it, and so we push it to one side, focusing instead on our short term sense of security and well-being.

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<sup>13</sup> See especially Eph.5:1-2.

<sup>14</sup> See all of Eph., 4 through to 6:9. Read this section with particular attention to Eph.5:1.

We do this, even while not too deep down, we know that living with our heads in the sand is simply “storing up wrath for the day”, as it were.

In this sense it is our *failure of imagination* that is the real issue facing us as contemporary Christians. Even while we gather to worship in Advent – the season of hope; and even as we are mindful of Paul’s warnings to leave behind our skewed understandings of the present life, yet still, like the world around us, we live like frightened possums caught in headlights. Paralysed with a sense anomie, that somehow everything is beyond us, we demonstrate no credible vision of the future. This is because, so myopic are we in our reading of scripture, that we *have* no credible vision of what Jesus’ present and coming reign among us means, apart from the practice of personal faith.

For some (certainly, I’m bound to say, those more genuinely pious than myself), this at least flows forth in kindness and individual acts of love. Yet this seldom coheres into a perception of the church as a collective. Very few indeed these days, look to the church and say, as Tertullian put it, “see how those people love each other”.<sup>15</sup> Yet sociologist and historian Rodney Stark argues that it was precisely out of urban chaos and crisis that “the obscure, marginal, Jesus movement became the dominant religious force in the Western world in just a few centuries”.<sup>16</sup> It was through the widespread practice of sacrificial love, the sort of common life Paul insists upon for those who profess to be disciples of Jesus, that the early Christians accidentally subverted the empire.<sup>17</sup>

Maybe it’s because ‘sacrifice’ is so antithetical to everything we are enculturated to be and do that we just can’t grasp such a collective vision? We can talk about it but we find it very hard to live a life *for* others and intimately connected *with* others. Instead we prefer to reduce the reign of God to the realm of “religious experience”, to religion as comfort or even spooky entertainment, rather than prophetic witness through obedience.

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<sup>15</sup> Jn.13;35. See also quotes from Tertullian <http://www.tertullian.org/quotes.htm>

<sup>16</sup> See Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal, Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force...*, Harper Collins, 1997., ch.6.

<sup>17</sup> See also, Peter Leithart, *Defending Constantine: The Twilight of an Empire and the Dawn of Christendom*, IVP, 2010.

In the 1994 re-write of his famous apology ‘The Dust of Death’, Os Guinness expressed what I am trying to say here, very succinctly if not bluntly:

“Modern Christianity is ...drastically weakened [through its adoption of] an unmediated, personal, experiential knowledge of God. Often, what passes for religious experience is a communal emotion felt in church services, in meetings, in singing or contrived fellowship. Few Christians would know God on their own. [Yet, ironically], the modern church is often pathetically feeble in the expression of its focal principle of community [in any depth]. It has become instead a social club [or hobby]... With these weaknesses, modern Christianity cannot understand why people have turned elsewhere, let alone stand against the trend and offer an alternative.”<sup>18</sup>

The logical outcome of this, of course, is that if religion is all about God and me and my experience of the transcendent, then why bother with church at all? Why not go bush walking or sailing, get into the arts or sit up a pole or whatever else you feel connects you to something bigger than yourself, creates a sense of awe and inner peace. How often have you heard people – even Christians, say just this?

According to Paul, mystical experience so pursued in itself is simply another form of idolatry – something aspect of the creation we adore instead of the creator.<sup>19</sup> Holding my encounter with God as central to my faith allows me to avoid hard realities of discipleship and, in the process, dumb down the very thing that can save – not just us – but our desperate world. Instead of the now and future community of saints watching, waiting, laying down our lives for each other and, in so doing, confronting the “powers” that enslave us and calling a wayward humanity to repentance and faith, we have a “spiritual” counterfeit offering temporary release yet unable to save us from our fears and impotence. Yes, this Jesus promised to be with us “always even to the end of the age.”<sup>20</sup> But this promise was very much about being with us while we get about his business.

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<sup>18</sup> <https://wordsofgrace.wordpress.com/2009/09/18/todays-quote-christianity-guinness/>

<sup>19</sup> Rom. 1:21.

<sup>20</sup> Matt.28:20; Luke24”44-49.

This is precisely the point that Paul makes in his discussion of “gifts of the Spirit” in his first letter to the Corinthians.<sup>21</sup> That early assembly of believers so longed to be in Jesus’ company, so longed for his coming to put things aright, that they became fixated on this *absent* Jesus being made *present* by his Spirit. In so doing they exchanged their *calling* to *follow* him for their *desire* to *experience* him. In worshipping the ascended Christ at the right hand of God, they lost sight of living as Jesus in his world. They turned their faith in following the risen Jesus into a religion about a transcendent one.

In response, Paul firmly put it to that church that while personal religious experience may be of some use to the individual (it can be personally comforting and encouraging), it is building up the body of Christ for *service* and *witness* to all that God has done in Christ, that is our primary calling as his disciples.<sup>22</sup>

Our Gospel charges us to go and make disciples of all nations – real disciples who obey all that Jesus commanded, who together seek to submit every area of their lives to Christ. None of us would be here today if those who have gone before us hadn’t done precisely this. Ultimately, it will also be living in such a community, a community whose mutual *service* is its worship,<sup>23</sup> that is *truly* renewing for us. For it will be in such a community that we find *hope* and *empowerment* to live *now*, the *future* reality of God’s reign upon the earth.

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<sup>21</sup> See 1Cor.12 f.f.

<sup>22</sup> 1Cor.12:7; 14:1-4.

<sup>23</sup> Rom.12:1-2.