

Christ Church South Yarra

Evensong Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost Yr B 20 September 2009

Esther 3.8-11, 15-4.5, 12-14 Psalm 54 Mark 9.14-29

+ In the name of God who creates, redeems and sustains all life.

Thank you Richard and people of Christ Church for your invitation to be with you at the end of this day, and thank you for your warm welcome this evening. I bring you greetings from the people of St George's, some of whom have been able to accept your kind invitation to join you this evening. It's a lovely to be invited to visit our neighbours in the deanery and to worship with you!

Is there anything quintessentially more Anglican than Evensong? I hardly think so. Here we are in cassocks and 'comely surplices with sleeves' (as English law requires), academic hoods and preaching scarves. These strange garments are what I call with great affection our 'Church of England play clothes.' Here we are singing psalms and canticles, and versicles and responses. Calling what we do by Latinised names sounds so much grander than singing 'songs and sentences.' We know of course that what we do is the distillation of Jewish synagogue worship, filtered through Benedictine monastic patterns of prayer and distilled into a daily shape in English by the reforming skills of Thomas Cranmer. Not just almost five hundred years old, Evensong reaches back over two thousand years into Israel's praise, and these days it spans the globe. A few years ago Samuel Wells, an English vicar and ethicist asked the question,

I wonder how God makes himself known in Anglican Evensong... through hundred of years of finely honed words... I wonder also how the repeated practice of participating in... Evensong shapes the character and habits of worshippers, how the relentless rolling waves of liturgy gradually mould the stony defences of the sinner and the supple soul of the saint.¹

Samuel Wells concludes that Evensong 'expresses the full galaxy of human emotions, and embraces them within the wonder of God's story.' How true that is! We've heard from the story of Queen Esther who lived in mortally dangerous times. We've sung with the psalmist for protection from the ruthless who seek our lives, even if perhaps only metaphorically. We've eavesdropped on Jesus and the disciples when they were unable to act as he did, and heal a boy. So how might any of this mould our stony defences? I don't dare to ask what the impact might be on 'the supple souls of saints'; how could I recognise that?

So, what of Anglicans today? Given that God has been at work on us these past centuries Sunday by Sunday, how have we come to be in such strife with one another across the Communion? Mind you, as soon as I say that I remember that trouble and strife and disagreement have always been the way of the Church. We would not have nearly so many New Testament letters to local churches if they had been better behaved! And when you think about it further, this year is the five hundredth anniversary of King Henry's accession to the English throne. Who imagined in 1509 the strife Henry would cause breaking with Rome and creating an English national Church over which only the English sovereign in parliament had jurisdiction? If we Anglicans find ourselves in dispute does it have anything to do with being born out of strife? Perhaps that's a factor; more so than we care to acknowledge.

But there is also something deeper. And this evening's gospel holds some clues for us. The disciples cannot heal a boy who appears to have what we call epilepsy. The father attributes this illness to possession by a dumb spirit. He asks Jesus to have pity on his son and heal him if he can. The disciples have not been able to, so perhaps this poor father fears his son might be beyond any help.

¹ Wells, Samuel, "How Seventeenth Century Evensong Forms Twenty-first-century Character: An Evocation." *Journal of Anglican Studies*, Vol 2(2) December 2004, 70-74.

Jesus uses the situation to teach his disciples – in truth he tells them off for their lack of faith. Perhaps he also meant to point out to them the futility of their attempts at self sufficiency – something we might take to heart. In the end, the disciples could not do what Jesus could do because they did not have faith in God as Jesus had. Jesus did not drive out the demon but God did - through Jesus' faith. If this bunch is to become true disciples of Jesus, they must turn to God in the same way that Jesus turns and turns over his life to the one he calls 'Father'.

Well we think, 'yes' of course, each of us must open our own hearts; take responsibility for our own response to Jesus and God's power at work in him. But what if we start to ask how we might take this gospel to heart together, as Anglican Christians living on the eve of a diocesan Synod, in a national church in a network of provinces around the world? How would we listen and talk to one another if we took seriously that our sins and human shortcomings never stop the flow of God's transforming love for us or for 'them'. Neither our own, nor what we rightly or perhaps not so correctly consider the sins of other people, can out narrate the glorious narrative of God's work of redemption. Perhaps if we were a little less sure that what others do is wrong, and they had more humility towards us– I think I mean trust in us- we could certainly hear more of one another and perhaps more of what the Spirit may be saying to our Church.

The psalms never fudge trouble. The psalmist is never sentimental. If we could learn the courage of the psalmist and share our fears and our anxieties not only with God but with our sisters and brothers of a different view would it make a difference? I hope so. I want to believe so and how would we know unless we tried it.

And if we realised the scriptures read us just as much as we read them, wouldn't we all have more of the compassion the dumb boy's father longed for? Synod debates would cease to turn upon the alleged plain meanings of texts and focus instead on the meaning of the plain needs and distress, opportunities and openings all around us.

Anglican worship is essentially this milieu of interaction of our particular past and our local present context; of scripture then and our lives now; of the words we say and sing this evening, and the things we will do tomorrow and the day after that. It's interaction between us and God; yes; but it is also between 'us' – the 'us' in the deanery and the 'us' in the diocese and in these times the 'us' of the Communion. At that level it is very, very far from simple. More locally we have more likelihood of stony defences becoming hearts of flesh. As the disciples discovered, being faithful is a matter of day to day living, learning along the way what will shape obedience when things come to, what seems at first, their bitter end. A frustrated Jesus asked how long he had to be with his disciples before they got' it'? Notice, he was still with them all the way to Jerusalem.

Well, in South Yarra it seems you've abandoned the square caps required for proper clergy dress in the later years of King Edward's reign. Just as well I suppose. I haven't had a Canterbury cap since I was a child chorister. But let none of us abandon Evensong. After all, it is one of the glories of our Anglican way of being Christians and it might yet change us.

Without the song of the young outsider Mary ringing in our ears and the cry of the old man who had finally seen the newborn baby he longed to behold, the psalms, the scriptures, the creeds we would not only be impoverished as Anglicans; we would be far less likely to remain disciples after the pattern of Jesus Christ. And our faithful following is, when all the music is put away and the prayer books are back on the shelf, the true purpose of Evensong.

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