

All or Nothing

a sermon preached on the

2nd Sunday of Easter

Sunday 19 April 2009

at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

by Fr David Moore

parish priest

Lection: Acts 4:32-35, 1 John 1:1-2:2, John 20:19-31

In an unexpected development, this morning we are going to baptise the great, great granddaughter of a former vicar of St Luke's, one Frederick Norman Taylor. Your great, great grandfather was vicar here, Grace, between 1913 and 1936, serving here during WW1 and the depression. Clearly a courageous and principled man, he preached non-violence when fighting for the country was considered a religious duty by the majority. You'll be interested in his thoughts about children in church: "There is an idea abroad that it is quite enough for children to attend school on Sundays, and then that, when they are old enough, they will attend the services instead. But it simply doesn't work, and we must have the children with us from their earliest years."¹ He also declared that the church exists for the service of the community, ² a very modern idea for 1925, and one which successive generations of St Luke's people have endeavoured to embody. But on this second Sunday of Easter when we hear about fearful disciples of Jesus in a locked room, and baptise you, Grace, it's his views on discipleship which have really caught my attention. It was 1920, times were tough, church attendance was on the decline:

What we need now is not more Christians but better Christians. We seem to be getting back to the early days of Christianity, when it was all or nothing, a few whole-hearted Christians in the midst of a pagan world; and after all it was in those days that the Church exercised the greatest influence, rather than in the days when Christianity became fashionable and there was room for half-hearted adherents. ³

Your great, great grandfather, Grace, was ahead of his time – this assessment of the state of the Church was the subject of a great deal of publishing and speech-making during the 1990s!

All or nothing – that's an accurate summation of the call of baptism. "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptised with the baptism with which I am baptised?" Jesus asks his power-hungry and fearful disciples. ⁴ "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me."⁵ "Do you not know," Peter writes to the early church, "that all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life."⁶ "Receive the Holy Spirit," Jesus tells them, baptising them not with water but with Spirit. "If you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."⁷

Having been baptised into Christ's death and resurrection, drinking the cup, taking up the cross, being buried with Christ in baptism, forgiveness and reconciliation are a case of all or nothing. When forgiveness is withheld, reconciliation is impossible. There's no half-measure to forgiveness – if we do not forgive others their sin is retained, reconciliation is thwarted, the world remains divided, the Kingdom cannot come. While Thomas gets tangible evidence of the reality of this reconciliation - of heaven and earth, Spirit and flesh,

¹ Chalklen M, *The Church to the North of the River Avon*, Christchurch: Vestry of the Church of St Luke the Evangelist, 1985, p37.

² Chalklen M, p41.

³ Chalklen M, p43.

⁴ Mark 10:38

⁵ Mark 9:34

⁶ Romans 6:3-4

⁷ John 20:22-23

Divinity and humanity - in the resurrected body of Jesus, many, Jesus tells him, will come to believe in spite of not seeing him. 'Believing' is not really about the rational acceptance of a collection of ideas, but is participation, more like an embodiment of the reconciliation of the opposites Jesus holds together. Embodiment, as Father Taylor seems to have known, is bound to be costly. As Jesus tells Thomas, many *will* come to participate in his costly embodiment of death and resurrection, by water and Spirit, and thus share in Christ's ministry of reconciling Heaven and earth. This embodiment of Christ's death and resurrection is an all-or-nothing affair.

Baptism is the ritual act in which this reconciling of heaven and earth is promised as Divine gift, and at the same time costly, life-giving, life-long embodiment is pledged, in some cases by parents and sponsors. Like all ritual acts, and like all profound religious symbols, the pouring of water, signing with Chrism, and handing over of Paschal light has nothing to do with magic – suffering, hardship, loss, incompleteness, and death remain human realities. Furthermore, like all archetypal symbols, baptism is both a singular and accomplished fact, a promise already completed, and at the same time a life-long quest and work – for who can ever know what will be the implications of any undertaking that we make!

It will take a life-time to undergo that work of completion, which is both the subject of the baptismal gift and simultaneously the object of our heart's desire. Inevitably, that completeness which we desire can only be apprehended incrementally. The small child's vision of completeness is naturally enough a vision suited to a family-sized world, focussed on mummy and daddy and siblings and other close family. Where religion is fashionable it tends to be limited by such a child-sized vision of completeness, extended only to family and tribe, and perhaps to nation. Whole-hearted, all-or-nothing, discipleship of Christ, however, calls forth a vision of completeness in which family and tribal reconciliation is simply too puny, a vision which of by definition extends to enemy and stranger and alien, to dispossessed and poor and refugee, to the 'sad, mad and bad', and ultimately to the entire cosmic order. Because of this all-or-nothing commitment to Christ's death and resurrection is bound to be the cause of deep suffering, as well as the most exquisite and sublime joy and freedom we can ever know, which John the evangelist calls 'life in Christ's name'.⁸

Baptism into Christ's death and resurrection constitutes a promise made on your behalf and supported by your parents and sponsors, Grace, a promise your great, great grandfather would applaud. At the same time it gestures towards a deep yearning which is a life-long restlessness for complete union, in the reconciliation of Divinity and humanity in your own flesh – a restlessness that only finds rest in God alone. This restlessness for complete union, which we have not yet seen but which we believe, we all share with you.

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