

Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

The Reverend Andrew Sempell

St James Apostle and Martyr

25 July 2024

“The glory of the Lord filled the house”

Readings: Jeremiah 45; Psalm 126;
2 Corinthians 4: 7-15; Matthew 20: 20-28.

This is a new experience for me, however I thank the Rector, Fr Christopher, for his invitation to preach at this Patronal Festival Eucharist on what is a most significant moment in the life of this church.

You may think that the bicentenary has been a ‘long time coming’ – well, two hundred years to be precise. Yet, in the tradition of St James Church, the party has not been a ‘one off’ affair. Five years ago (BC – i.e. before covid) we commenced our bicentenary celebrations with an Orchestral Mass, followed by a commemorative liturgy in Queens Square, and then a dinner in the church to mark the bicentenary of the laying of the foundation stone by Governor Macquarie.

Following this in 2020 COVID struck, which required the curtailment of the many other events that were planned for the great celebrations. Nevertheless, activities continued with fundraising for the new Dobson pipe organ, the production of several musical compositions (including the St James’ Mass by Gabriel Jackson to be heard this Sunday), and the writing of a comprehensive history of St James’ church by Professor Mark Hutchinson - to be released next year.

We have heard of the challenges surrounding the building of the organ. Midst COVID threat and factory fire the new instrument has risen phoenix-like into our very presence to continue the work of its predecessors in leading our people in worship and enhancing the life of our community with music. I therefore acknowledge Lynn Dobson (unable to be with us because of the recent IT outage) and John Panning, along with so many others who have contributed to this project.

Introduction

But now to business. In the name of the Father...

...it was the duty of the trumpeters and singers to make themselves heard in unison in praise and thanksgiving to the Lord, and when the song was raised, with trumpets and cymbals and other musical instruments, in praise to the Lord,

*'For he is good, for his steadfast love endures for ever',
the house, the house of the Lord, was filled with a cloud so that the priests could
not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the Lord filled the
house of God. (2 Chronicles 5: 13-14)*

This was an account of the dedication of Solomon's Temple, but it does sound rather like an Orchestral Mass at St James!

Exposition - In the beginning...

Music is an integral part of the life of this church; but what do we understand of music itself? To answer this question I turned to that great treatise on church life, Anthony Trollope's *Barchester Towers* - and please forgive me repeating an indulgence. The scene is Choral Mattins in Barchester Cathedral, where the newly arrived Bishop's Chaplain is setting about converting the people of Barchester to the 'true faith'.

I quote: *'On this occasion the Chaplain took as his text: "Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth." He paused, eyed the congregation and then reminded them of his personal humility as a preacher - in case they had not noticed.*

Then the theme of his homily was revealed in all its force: 'In the beginning was the Word; the Word! Not music! Not meretricious melody!' he boomed, and so he went on, decrying everything upon which stood the Barchester tradition. The fruits of Mr Slope's sermon were dissention, contention and ongoing hostility within the diocese.'

People in the cathedral were both outraged and perplexed. The Cathedral Precentor, the saintly Reverend Septimus Harding, reacted saying:

"If there is no music, there is no mystery. If there is no mystery, there is no God. If there is no mystery, there is no faith."

Humanity knows intuitively that music is a powerful form of communication having the capacity to touch us at the depth of our being. Indeed, it can reveal to us something of the mystery of being human on the one hand, and of the mystery of God on the other. But is music a means to sharing the 'good news'?

Development - Saying and Hearing What We Want

Mr Slope said what he wanted to say. It was not well received, but he gained attention and a degree of fame in the environs of Barchester. Perhaps that was his reward - 'bad news' can be good for those who promote it.

A strange phenomenon is the human desire for ‘bad news’, whereby the misfortune of others becomes the news we want to hear. The Germans have a descriptive word for it; *schadenfreude*. Bad news sells newspapers - and more importantly, advertising space. It also creates division and hostility – the fruits of Mr Slope’s sermon. Unfortunately, through the practice of ‘saying and hearing what we want’, we have our prejudices supported, our egos stroked, and our ideology affirmed – everything we witness so often in the political process. But what about ‘good news’?

Jesus came to preach the good news of God’s Kingdom and a salvation that brings grace, peace and justice. To be sure, Jesus’ message was not necessarily good news for the religious and political leaders of his day who had an interest in maintaining the status quo, however his message was one of hope for the poor, the needy, and the marginalised. What has emerged from Jesus’ teaching and ministry, his death and resurrection, is that the good news of the Kingdom is about an ability to change both ourselves and our communities for the better; but it has a cost.

Variation - The Seats of Honour

Tonight’s gospel reading describes our patron James and his brother John, accompanied by their mother, seeking a special status in the Kingdom of God. The exercise demonstrated that they neither understood the gospel message nor the nature of God’s Kingdom. Indeed, their behaviour was self-seeking and egotistical. James and John had the expectation of a reward for their loyal service, which was to be manifest through the achievement of status, and its accomplice power.

This is not a new story; for James and John demonstrate the shortcomings of human nature. The base desires for money, status and power (along with many other idols) have been an obsession for humanity from the very beginning. Institutions frequently embody these values with titles, exorbitant salaries, narratives, and deference to those in power. Moreover, the church often reflects the wider world with similar behaviour. James and John (and their mother) therefore represent everyone by their actions.

Jesus responded by reminding his disciples that the Kingdom is achieved through service and suffering not selfish ambition. It is with great irony that the Gospel ultimately describes the two thieves on the cross as taking the positions of honour on the right and left of Jesus as he came into his Kingdom, and in time James was to follow Jesus and die a martyr’s death. To be sure, the mystery of entering the Kingdom ‘costs not less than everything’.

Recapitulation - Being Christ to the World

St Paul argued that participation in God’s Kingdom is discovered through the action of being Christ to the world. It is a mystery, which he described as ‘treasure in clay jars’. Unsurprisingly, his imagery was extreme:

We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. (2 Corinthians 4: 8-10)

This is not rationalistic talk; for how can death bring us life? Central to the mystery of the Christian faith is the idea that ‘we are the body of Christ’ – as we affirm at the greeting of peace. We follow Jesus in his life and ministry, and we ultimately follow Christ in his death and resurrection.

Jesus said that the Kingdom of God is both ‘within and among us’ – both individual and corporate. Moreover, being ‘in the Kingdom’ for us means that we, the followers of Christ, are meant to be Christ to the world today.

The sign of being Christ is the observable presence of grace (or unconditional love), which is the nature of God. As St John wrote:

*God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God,
and God abides in them. (1 John 4: 16)*

A vital aspect of grace is the active concern for another person’s well-being. It contrasts with Obadiah Slope’s sermon that brought ‘dissention, contention and ongoing hostility within the diocese.’ The absence of grace is the absence of God; and that is the test. When someone is not being gracious they are not being Godly.

People of St James’ church, our calling is to be the gracious presence of Christ to the world around us. It is a mystery, it is something costly, it is relational, it is diverse, but it is good news.

Coda

So, I come to the coda.

“If there is no music, there is no mystery. If there is no mystery, there is no God. If there is no mystery, there is no faith.”

Our worship has many facets – prayer, the reading of the Scriptures, teaching and preaching. In all of this, the ministry of music remains one of the primary means of communicating both the Word and the wonder of God – bringing grace, renewal, faith, and good news!