

Chrism Eucharist Sermon Tuesday 12 April 2022 (Avonhead, Ashburton)

Readings: Isaiah 49:1-7; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31; John 12:20-36

Introduction

[The sermon began with noting various retirements and movements of clergy in recent or coming months]

I acknowledge the painful challenges of the Covid season or seasons we are going through – seasons which may, or may not be coming to an end (e.g. looking over to Shanghai). I thank you and your parishioners for your faithfulness and patience through these difficult times.

Let's be honest: this Covid season is a good time to do preparation and planning for Regeneration and I am delighted that many ministry units are talking with Archdeacon Mark Chamberlain, our newly appointed Archdeacon for Regeneration and Mission.

But this Covid season is a tough time to work out what is going on with our congregations, as numbers go up and down through these weeks of anxiety about Omicron - let alone try to determine whether there are sustainable signs of regeneration in a period of uncertainty and change.

Changes to vicar appointments across the Diocese is an opportunity to rejuvenate our college of clergy. Please pray with me that the Lord will supply new generations of clergy for our Diocese.

This year the public connection between the work of the Royal Commission on Abuse, and our Diocese is fairly quiet. But important work continues.

A steering group is working hard on a range of matters relating to past abuse in our Diocese and how we might as a Diocese via our Synod make some amends for unsatisfactory responses to past abuse and work on ensuring our present and future practice in safeguarding ministry is the best it can humanly be. We will have more to say about this at Clergy Conference in May.

Our Scriptures today and the purposes of this service: blessing chrism oils and renewal of ministry vows

In recent years I have been attempting to engage with the theology of Henri De Lubac, a 20th century French Jesuit theologian who some say was the greatest theologian of the 20th century.

To be honest I am finding him difficult to understand in terms of his most important technical work as a theologian. His greatest insights concerned the relationship between divine grace and human nature.

We might relate those insights to the oils we consecrate or set apart today for special use in healing and other ministries: creation is a gift from God, a grace in itself; the work of the Holy Spirit (or the supernatural in relation to the natural) is also a grace, a gift from God to creation and to us as creatures: together God and humanity, supernature and nature, participate in God's plan for all things to be united. To use oil from nature in the healing of a natural person through the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit is to conform to God's will in and for creation.

But de Lubac was not an ivory tower theoretician. He was a soldier in the First World War and a member of the French Resistance in the Second World War. In the 1950s he was more or less

forbidden to teach and publish by Roman Catholic authorities and in the 1960s he was rehabilitated and made a significant contribution to Vatican 2. At the age of 87 he was made a cardinal by John Paul II. He had plenty of experience of the reality of church life.

So, out of his experiences, he once likened the Church to a boat

“full of unruly passengers who always seem to be on the point of wrecking it.”

The Splendour of the Church (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986, pp. 112-13).

The Patriarch Kirill, sadly, seems to be one of those unruly passengers as his strong, aggressive support for Putin’s invasion of Ukraine casts a slur on all Christians everywhere who stand for the Gospel of peace.

When we renew our ordination vows shortly, I imagine that, some of us might be thinking, is my renewal dedicated to managing the unruly passengers on the boat and to saving the boat from being wrecked?

I hope not. Our Scriptures today speak to the big picture of God’s work in the world – the work we are called to participate in by virtue of our baptism as disciples of Christ.

Our calling is to change the world, not to manage the church

“I will give you as **a light to the nations**, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” (Isaiah 49:6b)

The memorable words spoken by the Greeks to Andrew,

“Sir, we wish to see Jesus” (John 12:21),

are spoken by Greeks – the nations of the world are being drawn to the light of the world which Isaiah foretells.

Paul takes up Isaiah’s challenge:

“For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but **we proclaim Christ crucified**, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” (1 Corinthians 1:22-24)

If our calling is to change the world then the key to change lies neither in spectacular acts of power or following the wisdom of the secular world: it lies in the way of the crucified Christ.

To be Christian is to proclaim in word and deed the way of the crucified Christ as a “third way” between the way of power or domination and the way of wisdom or advancement through knowledge.

One of the things that makes me feel sick about Patriarch Kirill’s support for Putin’s invasion of Ukraine and murders of its innocent citizens is that this is the opposite of proclaiming Christ crucified – the way of Christ is dying for others not killing others.

Conclusion

Our calling is to change the world, not to manage the church.

Jesus himself in the Gospel passage sets out the direction of our ministry:

“Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also.” (John 12:26)

The renewal of our ministry vows today is a renewing of our commitment to serve God by following Jesus and be available to be where Jesus is in the world.

This is costly, this is all too often painful and it can feel unrewarding.

May we be encouraged by the promise of Jesus as John 12:26 concludes:

“Whoever serves me the Father will honour.”

Bishop Peter Carrell