

## Delightful Urgency

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C, 3 July 2022

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT Australia

**The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell**

*Isaiah 66: 10-14; Psalm 66: 1-8; Galatians 6: 7-18; Luke 10: 1-11, 16-20*

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

If you could come up with a word to describe ordinary, mainstream Anglicanism, what might that word be? Would it be 'reasonable', or 'tolerant'? How about 'inclusive', or 'welcoming'? Or would it be 'comprehensive'? Someone in my family of origin might well have said 'respectable'. For my family, as for many others in England and America still, being Church of England or Episcopalian marks out a spiritual superiority, with a class element thrown in. In light of all that, there's one word that will never occur to anyone as a description of ordinary, mainstream Anglicanism, and that word is 'urgent'. Yet our Gospel today is unquestionably, inescapably urgent, is it not, with Jesus' summons to world challenging mission? Friends, what *are* we to make of it?

There was a woman in my first parish back in Brisbane who'd come to us from the Salvation Army. I think she's a Baptist now. Anyway, after she'd gotten a bit used to us, she'd ask me why Anglicans were so bland about their faith, and so unwilling to talk about religious matters, compared with the much more intense Christian life she'd known in the Salvation Army.

I told her about Ernst Troeltsch, the German theologian a century back who distinguished between "church type" and "sect type"—there were types of Christian who aimed to fit in and follow the norms of wider society, as in the Protestant state churches of Germany and England, and then there were those other Christian groups that disdained normal social goals and expectations, insisting on following Christ at a tangent to polite convention. Most normal Anglicans, I told her, were Church type, with an unease about the sect type. The sect types were typically puzzled, even scandalized, by the compromises and the laxity that they perceived in mainstream, church-type Christianity. My job, I told her, was to help spark up the church types, and to tone down the sect types. My conviction was, and is, of an urgent calling for Christians and Churches today, just as there was when Jesus was summoning his Church to its mission in today's Gospel. But we have to get it right. To put it in Goldilocks terms, the church type is too cold, and the sect type is too hot. What's the just right solution?

In our Galatians reading today, Paul is giving his frustrating Galatian congregation a final serve. The problem is respectability, with Jewish Christians insisting on their own marker of respectable insider status, which is circumcision. Paul knows that the Jewish law, which mandates circumcision among so many other things, was meant to be a blessing of identity and belonging. But too readily it becomes a badge of honour and a marker of cultural superiority. There are law-abiding people who can do no wrong still, aren't there, and they like you to know that. Like all those law-abiding gun owners in the US who're helping make America great again, *unlike* all those disreputable liberals who support abortion or environmental regulation or fair electoral boundaries.

As I learned at a young age, however, respectability is *not* necessarily a marker of anything really worthwhile, and in large part I learned this from reading St Paul. Instead of circumcision as a status marker, he boasts the low-status marker of Christ's own wounds, inflicted on him by his enemies as a sign of how loathsome he and his message regularly

proved to be. His boast was the cross of Jesus Christ, which will not get you a seat on the board, or an AM.

If there are frustrations with a too-bland, Church-type Anglicanism, is the alternative for us to become more sectarian? Some in our Australian Church certainly think so, or at least up to a point. Strangely, though, it's not wealth or privilege or social accolades that they oppose, or gossip or slander or division, all of which the New Testament warns us about. Instead, it's about one narrow range of issues only, same-sex unions and sex outside of marriage, about which Jesus didn't seem particularly exercised at all. These issues dominated our recent General Synod, though, and I confidently expect them to reappear at our pending Diocesan Synod. What we see here, to my mind, is spiritually confused, as if a competing version of respectability is being proposed.

To be truly urgent, however, we do best to follow Jesus' lead. In today's gospel, Jesus invites those he commissions to take up a share in his own mission, in pairs—which the medieval friars, the Franciscans and Dominicans, took quite literally, and changed Europe accordingly. He sends them out along the road less travelled. No lengthy middle Eastern palavers along the way—greet no-one on the road. No focus on social life, let alone finding a berth in a better neighbourhood—just stay in one place and get on with it. And no confusion about what we're there for, either, because it's the Kingdom of God, it's the intrusion of transformed lives, of healed brokenness, of good news for bad. And if they're not interested, move on, because this is urgent and you're not to waste your time—your potential contribution isn't to be squandered.

The seventy come back flushed with success and Jesus tells them what this all means. Satan has fallen like lightning from heaven. Putting this in more modern terms, the system has been blown open, the false transcendence of the status quo has been profoundly questioned, the existing social order has been confronted by an alternative social order that will prevail. There's a new kid on the block, his name is Jesus Christ, and with him the Church becomes the grit in history's oyster, helping to bring forth a new pearl, called the Kingdom of God.

But, friends, this isn't sectarian excess; this isn't motivated by contemptuous self-assertion and spiritual superiority. And it's not a slugfest, it's not a culture war. Remember that when the disciples boast of their success to Jesus at the end of today's Gospel, he tells them that the really important thing isn't that the demons submit, it isn't that they've won out in the culture wars if you like, but instead it's because their names are written in heaven.

In other words, this is about finding and claiming and celebrating a new identity, grounded in Christ's loving urgency, in his zeal for a healed and transformed world, in his yearning for closeness to God the heavenly Father, into whose close company he's bringing us through baptism and Eucharist.

The Old Testament reading and the Psalm today are a strange pair of partners for this intense Gospel reading, with their picture of a joyful and peaceful abiding. Not much urgency there. Until we remember what sort of urgent call we receive in today's gospel. It's an urgent call to embrace the joy of the Kingdom, to be insiders in God's family that insists on no outsiders, to be freed from self-defining sectarian rivalry while at the same time being lifted out of Churchy torpor. It's a life of joy together, with a purpose, which is being part of a new human story—in Christ, in the Church, and in the Eucharist, where all this is laid out for us so that even the likes of ordinary Anglicans can see it and know it and inhabit it. It's urgent, yes, but it's the urgency of delight, it's the urgency of love, it's the urgency of seizing the day, not the urgency of hurtfulness, of contempt, of self-justification.

A final word. Rather than worry about same sex marriage, or worry too much about what the teenagers are getting up to, why doesn't the Church think more about deepening and strengthening its teaching about marriage, its support for marriage, and its expectations of marriage? Instead of letting marriage be about Instagram weddings and romantic love and sexual intensity and then easy divorce whenever all this peters out—which is the norm in our society, isn't it, and in our churches too if the truth be known—what if we saw marriage in more theological and in more missional terms? What if we saw Christian marriage as Jesus sending us out two by two in his mission, to be agents of his Kingdom in the world? What if we saw marriage less as a Protestant contract and more of a Catholic sacrament? What if the same-sex marriage problem that exercises so many in our Church became an opportunity instead: an opportunity to recover marriage as a spiritual calling, as a structural participation in the Kingdom of God, and as today's main context for Christian mission? Urgent, certainly, but delightfully so, given the joy and purpose that's on offer.

The Lord be with you ...