

***Parting Words: Last Sermon as an Anglican Priest***

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

Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year B, 17 March 2024

*Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 119:9-16; Hebrews 5:5-14; John 12:20-33*

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

It's fitting as I conclude my six years at St Philip's to meet St Philip again in today's Gospel: "Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip ... and said to him, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus'" (John 12:20).

As we know, people come to church for a range of reasons. Some value community, some tradition, others are seeking some spirituality in secular times. An apparently quite distinguished parish council chairman once told me that he came to church for the music and to keep his wife happy. But there are still people who come to church like those Greeks in today's gospel, looking to see Jesus.

And what will they find? They'll find us! They'll find a small gathering of Christians assembled to hear the Word and to celebrate the Eucharist. And this is precisely where they're going to see Jesus if he's to be seen anywhere. What a remarkable thing, for the Eucharistic community to be given such a gift and such a task. But there it is.

However, the Greeks looking for Jesus in today's Gospel were about to get more than they bargained for. Perhaps they thought that Jesus would be like a Greek philosopher, proclaiming a stable Greek cosmos, a static tableau of settled meaningfulness, a still vision to set against a tumultuous world. If so, many people are still looking for something like that today, hoping that Jesus might give them such security, such certainty. But instead, their arrival and their question to Philip sounded an alarm. The Jesus they'd meet would instead disrupt worldly security and stability, he would challenge ideological certainties and withhold an entirely satisfying closure. Instead, the tableau would become a drama, the festival of Passover would become the struggle of Holy Week, Good Friday and Easter, while the Jesus they sought would turn out to be nothing less than the divinely ordained bringer of a very different outcome for humanity: not uncritical peace but the judgement of our false peace, turned upside down by a cross that shows just how our world works; not an escape from evil and death and violence but instead the overcoming of evil and death and violence. That's what Jesus's lifting up on the cross meant, and that's how Jesus is still drawing people to himself.

Our Epistle reading today from Hebrews makes clear that Jesus's work is actually God's work: through his life, through his flesh, through his suffering solidarity in obedience to God's uncompromising love. And Hebrews admits that this is a hard teaching. We may prefer something softer, friendlier, chattier from our life in the Church, but instead at the heart of what brings us here is God's outreach to humanity through Jesus Christ—a Church born in God's outreach through the Eucharist rather than from our spiritual aspirations and good intentions.

Indeed, Hebrews today draws a contrast between the children's milk and the adults' solid food in explaining what we're doing here. This isn't primarily sociology and inclusive community, then. This is theology and God's mission, with a call to maturity that requires us to grow in our spiritual dietary expectations.

Now, friends, none of this is harsh or threatening, simply because it's all-encompassing and perhaps more serious than our usual way of thinking about the Christian life. In our Jeremiah passage today the seriousness of this commitment is presented in very personal and intimate terms. It's about a law written on our heart, rather than something external and imposed and alien that we might get sick of and fall away from—something we can trust and own and inhabit, something that becomes part of us, as we come to know God and to know ourselves as God's people, as God's friends.

Finally, as you probably know, this isn't only my last Sunday at St Philips but today also marks my last acts of public ministry in the Anglican Church, after nearly 36 years as a priest. In the Easter season Lisa and I will be received into the Roman Catholic Church and I'll begin a formal process of discernment with a view to my being ordained as a Catholic priest—in the place where all my spiritual instincts as a catholic-minded Anglican have long been drawing me. So, you'll permit me a little personal story to tie up what I've been saying to you today and thus to take leave of the Anglican pulpit.

Once before—just over forty years ago, in my early twenties, as an ordination candidate at St Francis' Theological College in Brisbane—I very nearly left to join the Catholic Church and pursue priestly ordination there, more specifically in the Dominican order, the Blackfriars, the Order of Preachers. I was electrified to discover that eight-centuries old community of scholar preachers, with their motto that could have been my own: 'to contemplate and share the fruits of your contemplation with others'. While I eventually drew back at the time—because the new Pope, John Paul II, was canning all the Catholic theologians who I most liked reading—a priestly calling to theologically informed preaching, teaching and writing took hold of me and has shaped my whole life ever since.

So, the step I'm finally taking certainly isn't a hasty one. I see it as seeking to follow more closely and to go more deeply into the vision that's always guided me.

In today's psalm portion I see an echo of that vision in which I've found my own joy and my life's work, and where I hope I might continue in active ministry for many more years as priest, preacher and theologian. That way I can continue the surprising and unexpected encounter with Jesus that those Greeks at the Festival would have discovered, and which I first discovered as a boy when I came to the Church like they did, looking to see Jesus. And ever since, by the grace of God and with a thankful heart, I've been able to make the words of today's psalm my own:

With my lips I have been telling:  
    all the judgements of your mouth;  
And I find more joy in the way of your commands:  
    than in all manner of riches.  
I will meditate on your precepts:  
    and give heed to your ways;  
For my delight is wholly in your statutes:  
    and I will not forget your word (Psalm 119:13-16).