

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
Year C - 27/10/2019

Joel 2:23-32
Psalm 65
2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18
Luke 18:15-30

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

As many of you will know, I spent last week on a silent retreat, in the beautiful surrounds of Sevenhill Benedictine Retreat Centre. The retreat was led by Grant Bullen, the Rector of St. Theodore's, Toorak Gardens, a priest whom I have known for most of my life, and who has been important in my formation and growth as a priest. Generally speaking, when he speaks, I tend to listen carefully.

This last week was no exception, and there was much wisdom on offer to us all. The primary aspect that I latched onto and reflected on during the week was his teaching about the soul - and how our clarity of thought and purpose comes when we are able to set aside the chatter of our minds and the meandering thoughts that tend to overwhelm us, and listen instead to our soul.

Grant introduced us to a theologian, Michael Singer, who has written much on this subject, and I begin with a quote from his book, "The Untethered Soul".

"The more you sit in the soul
The more you will begin to feel an energy
That you've never experienced before.
It comes up from behind, rather than in front
Where you experience your mind and emotions.
When you are no longer absorbed in your melodrama
But instead sit comfortably
Deep inside the seat of awareness,
You will start to feel this flow of energy
Coming up from deep within."

Now, you may not feel as though your life is a melodrama - I know mine feels like it sometimes!! But what Singer is trying to say is that if we can get in behind all of the noise; all of the chatter that tends to dominate our life, there is a richness to life that simply means it will never be the same again.

In a way, it's essentially a re-expression of Jesus' teaching in the second part of today's Gospel story. Here we have a ruler who claims that he has kept all the commandments and lived a virtuous life - but he doesn't get it.

Jesus challenges him to build up his treasure in heaven, rather than earth, and he goes away, disillusioned.... It's quite simple... You can see where your heart is, what you value, care about... what really matters to you... by where you spend your money, time and energy.

Now that might sound frightening if you consider what typical middle-class Australians, like you and me, invest ourselves in. Surely we're not 'in love' with our houses, careers, superannuation, cars, travel, golf course, football club... not really!

It's probably the word 'love' that's somewhat misleading... It's more that we're operating out of largely unconscious needs and fears. We're carrying deep and unfulfilled agendas for happiness that centre around our need for approval and recognition; security; and control.

Hence our money and our energy flows to those things/activities that promise to meet these agendas. It's the love-affair we've unconsciously given ourselves to. Why otherwise would we spend the very best we've got on this stuff? It's what Jesus says - look what you spend your resources on, and you'll know what's really driving you.

Has it ever been any different? Probably not... but Jesus dreamed of a day when people would fall in love with God. A day when we would put aside our primeval

fears and their agendas of necessity, and instead allow God to transform our vision and our lives.

Could anyone actually do this? In every generation there are people who do find this freedom. A very small number... but always present in the world and church of every era... and always saying to us... ‘It is possible to fall in love with God in a quite absolute, final way. And it does determine everything!’”

And so, much of my work here, as your Rector, consists of issuing you the invitation. Fall in love with God. Give your heart to God. Stop holding back! (All that other stuff is not going to work anyway.)

Is that it then? That’s a bit anticlimactic isn’t it? Surely as your priest I should be doing more than just giving you an invitation? Surely I should be trying to *get* you to do all sorts of things: give money; support programs; attend functions; go on committees; be more responsible; be more loving...

But all of that requires changing your hearts... and not only is that impossible for me to do... it is seriously none of my business. Your heart is between you and God. (The only heart I am responsible for is my own.)

Let me explain with a metaphor that I like to describe the relationship between priest and people in a parish - one that echoes the metaphor of God’s banquet used repetitively by Jesus in his parables...

God invites people to a banquet - to the great dinner-party of life and relationship, with tables groaning with fine food and wine. That’s what God does... each and every day...

And God sends messengers to carry the invitation far and wide, so everyone knows what’s on offer.

And that’s my job. It’s my job here... to issue the invitation to you - no more, no less. I will be held accountable for this work. Will I do it faithfully... sacrificially...

with courage... with passion... with love? Do I give my heart to it? Do I allow my heart to be broken over it? That's my responsibility before God.

But what you do with the invitation is entirely your business. Your hearts are your business. What happens next is between you and God.

This business - I issue God's invitation and you respond (or not) - is what happens between us every time we meet. And so once again, let me assure you...

God is reaching out to you with open arms. Let all of that other stuff that's consuming you slip away. Run to God. Fall in love with God.

That's all there is... No pressure, no manipulation, no threats, no promises, no spin, no guilt, no strategy, no expectation. Just an invitation.

But I do believe the Spirit of God is active in our midst. That there is a conversation, no matter how hidden, happening between God and you... even as we sit here this morning.

And the location of this conversation is... your heart. And so who knows what will happen from this interaction. But I do believe it is happening and I do have hope in this action of God.

And I am beginning to understand now what the saints have always taught... that at the end of the day... our only hope is in God. And I do have this hope. God will resurrect the church! God will bring all creation to fulfilment.

We are to choose from the disposition of our hearts. And as Singer explains -

“If you sit within the soul, you will begin to be sustained by the inner flow that comes from behind you. And when you have tasted the ecstasy of the inner flow, you can walk in this world as a free being.”

In the name of God. Amen.