

Incarnating - Practices that let us be Christ to the World

Series: Habits of the Heart: Practices to Commune with God and Transform your Life

Date: 3 July 2022, 3rd Sunday after Trinity

Location: St George's, Battery Point

Texts: Genesis 1:26-31, 2:15; Philippians 2:3-11; Matthew 25:31-46

When I went to Sydney for my Mum's funeral in 2020 I happened to be there for another funeral, one of the elderly gentlemen from the church I grew up in, Mr B. Every Sunday Mr B. would get to church before everyone, open the doors, make sure the foyer was tidy and set himself at the door, ready to welcome people to the service. I don't know when, but at some point he decided this was going to be the way he served God and served the church. He welcomed people for decades. At his funeral I learned that when he retired, Mr B asked the minister if he could help him in his home communion visits. This was especially helpful for new ministers, because since Mr B was at the door, every Sunday, welcoming people, he knew everyone. Despite the fact that he was well into his 90s when he died, his funeral was packed, full of all the people he had welcomed to church over the years. You could say he embodied Romans 15 verse 7 (NRSV).

Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

This is the second last of our sermon series on spiritual disciplines, *Habits of the Heart: Practices to commune with God and transform your life*. We've looked at Worship and the discipline of the Sabbath, Opening yourself to God and the discipline of the examen, Relinquishing the false self and discipline of Self Examination, Sharing our life and hospitality, Hearing from God's Word and *Lectio Divina*. Today we're looking at Incarnating - Practices that let us be Jesus to the World. I have to say I've found this the most difficult of this series to wrestle into a single sermon. Each of the disciplines are about communing with God and transformation. But this one feels like it's about everything that we do, our orientation and our actions towards others. You could say this sermon is about the second most important commandment - to love your neighbour as yourself. That is what it means for you and I to imitate Christ in the world. We can of course look no further than Jesus' justly famous parable of the Good Samaritan to see what it means to love your neighbour as yourself. Noticing the person in need. Stooping to serve. Binding up the wounded. Bearing the cost of that care. Loving even our enemies.

But to say, "incarnating" the love of Christ, is that an overreach? The New Testament calls the church the body of Christ. Each of us as members of Christ, and each given different gifts for

the common good. Paul uses this metaphor to emphasise our unity and equality in Christ. But I think the picture can also be extended to our relation with the world around us. The church is the body of Christ in the world. People encounter the love of Christ through us. We are, as it were, his hands and feet. What I love about the metaphor of the body is that it means we do not all do the same thing. We cannot nor should we. The Spirit distributes different gifts for the common good. There are different kinds of service, but we serve the Lord in all of them and God is at work through all of them. Mr B knew what his gift was and he served faithfully in that for many years - welcoming.

This does, however, make it difficult to speak about the discipline of incarnating the love of Christ, given the multitude of expressions that this can take. There is an element of discerning your own gifting, and maybe that is for another sermon. At the very least you can look at what you enjoy doing, what your availability is and what needs you can see and then look to serve in a need where you'll get to do what you enjoy. What I want to touch on briefly is 2 ways that we need to come at this discipline, no matter what we do - service and humility. Then we'll look at a particular practice in which to incarnate the love of Christ. The *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook* we've been following has 7 different practices. We did a series on Justice last year, looking at God's heart for the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the foreigner. I refer you to those sermons for the discipline of Justice. But I've chosen for today, care for creation, for reasons which will become clear.

Service

Jesus says, *the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.*¹ If we are to imitate Christ and embody his love in the world we must understand this task to be fundamentally that of service. Being like Jesus is being a servant. The context for this statement is Jesus' discussion with his disciples about authority and power. The natural way for us to come at power is to "lord it over" others, as Jesus' puts it. But Jesus says power and authority is to be deployed for the service of others. When I was in the Solomon Islands I visited their parliament house and above the main entrance it has these words - "To lead is to serve." I like that. What a good reminder for those given the most power.

I remember speaking with Fr. Michael Tate, the author of Australia's citizenship pledge. He said that one of the ways we encounter Christ is in the face of the poor. I take it he was summarising the parable of the sheep and the goats Jesus says that what we do for the least

¹ Mark 10:45

we do for him.² Jesus says “it is more blessed to give than to receive”.³ This is the promise of service - that in serving we not only imitate Christ but we are close to him, that we may even encounter him.

We may come quite easily to service. But such is the perversity of the human heart that even this can become an occasion for pride. We can become intensely aware of just how much we are serving. We can compare ourselves to others. “I do more than them.” “I’m a better servant.” We may resent it when others do not recognise the extent to which we’ve put ourselves out in serving. We become cross when things don’t go our way. We can think that those whom we serve owe us a moral debt. And maybe even God owes us. We may be serving but we can become proud, judgmental, resentful, just like the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son.

Humility

This is why it is not enough for us to imitate Jesus’ service, we must also learn to follow his example of humility. Here’s how Paul puts it in Philippians 2:3-8.

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, **4** not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

5 In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

6 who, being in very nature God,

did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;

7 rather, he made himself nothing

by taking the very nature of a servant,

being made in human likeness.

8 And being found in appearance as a man,

he humbled himself

by becoming obedient to death –

even death on a cross!

Did you notice the word *being* in verse 6. Jesus, “who *being* in very nature God, did not equality with God something to be used to his own advantage.”

Some translations of verse 6 translate that word *being* as *though*, or *in spite of the fact* that was in very nature God he did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, rather he made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant. This suggests that Jesus became a servant in spite of the fact he was God. We naturally think about God this way - we serve

² Matthew 25:31-46

³ Acts 20:35

God, not the other way around. We have to be humble because we're not God. But this is to miss the deeper point of this text. Jesus' humbling himself and becoming a servant is not in spite of the fact that he is God, but rather *because* he is God. His humble service in fact shows us what God is like, the Lord who serves, the high and holy one who stoops in humility, for us on the cross. If that is what God is like in himself and towards us in the cross, then how can we not clothe ourselves with this divine virtue?

Practice

Humility is the antidote to our pride. Service is something we do, humility is about our character, it's about the heart. Richard Foster writes,

More than any other single way the grace of humility is worked into our lives through the Discipline of service ... Nothing disciplines the inordinate desires of the flesh like service, and nothing transforms the desire of the flesh like serving in hiddenness.

The flesh whines against service but screams against hidden service. It strains and pulls for honour and recognition.⁴

How can we incarnate the love of Christ in our service? How can we do so in a way that helps us learn humility?

In his book *The Life You've Always Wanted: Spiritual Disciplines for Ordinary People*, John Ortberg suggests 2 simple starting points. First, the ministry of the mundane. This is just doing the little acts of unseen service that need to be done at home, at work and at church. Taking the rubbish out. Doing the washing up. Changing nappies. Making dinner. Folding the washing. Doing the vacuuming. Moving chairs. These can be joyful acts of worship that embody Christ's love. Second, the ministry of being interrupted. We all have important things to do. But we can think they are so important that we get frustrated when things get in our way and people interrupt us. That is more about our ego than service, or maybe that's just me. Responding with loving service to those who interrupt us is good for the soul.

Care of Creation

The discipline I wanted to focus on however is the Care of Creation. This may be a bit left field, but it's the first that Adele Alberg Calhoun names under the heading Incarnating.⁵ Creation Care goes right back to our first parents. *The Lord God placed the man in the garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.* I sometimes wonder whether Mary mistakes the risen Jesus as a gardener because he is the new Adam. God has given us the task of caring for his creation. Because of the Fall we all have a sense of alienation from not only God and each other, but

⁴ Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, Harper&Row, 1978:113-114

⁵ Adele Alberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, IVP, 2005: 180

also from the creation itself. In the closing chapter of the Bible we read of the garden city - where the river of the water of life flows from the throne of God and tree of life is there, somehow on each side of the river, and its leaves are for the healing of the nations.⁶ To care for creation is part of what it means for us to bear the image of God. And, at the same time, it is a foretaste of the new creation. To care for creation is to express God's love for his creation. Its beauty sings his praise.

There are all sorts of ways we can do this, but I've been thinking, God has given us at St George's a little patch of creation to care for, right here around us. We all love the beauty of this building, and how it points us to heaven. And we as a church have invested a huge amount of time and resources into its restoration. For that whole time we were blessed with a gardener who gave extraordinary amounts of time. I wonder if it is time for us, as a church, to move outside the doors to invest in our garden and grounds. The beauty and peace of our grounds can be for us and for our neighbours a foretaste of the new creation.

Now, I confess I have no idea about gardening. I just pull out weeds. But we have quite a number of gardeners at church. We've had a go at monthly gardening bees, but they have not been working, largely because our best gardeners are older and don't have the energy that this place needs. Our best gardening bee was our first when all our young adults turned up. Our garden is something I think we all have to own as members of St George's, young and old. I imagine what the garden could be for us. A place where the old pass their wisdom on to the young. A place where we grow together in community as we serve. A place where our neighbours see us working together as the body of Christ. A place where they can join in and find welcome and hospitality. A place where we learn patience and perseverance. A place where we learn to care for this world that God loves. A place where we taste and share the beauty and love and peace of the new creation. A place where we might encounter the true Gardener.

I want to finish by telling you about the forests of Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church. Over the past century 90% of Ethiopia's forests have been lost. In the dry highland province of Amhara, the only forest left are little circles that surround the churches scattered through the landscape. These are islands of green in a sea of brown agricultural land. Ecologically they raise the water table, they block destructive winds, they are home to yield boosting pollinators essential to the surrounding agriculture. The forests are maintained by the clergy

⁶ Revelation 22.1-3

and congregation of each church. Each forest is seen by their custodians as a mini garden of Eden. They point beyond themselves to the tree of life in Genesis and Revelation.⁷

We are not the Orthodox Tewahedo church in Ethiopia. But maybe, together, we can incarnate the love of Christ in caring for this garden. Maybe this place and we as its people can be a foretaste of the new creation as we serve and hold out the water of life in Jesus name.

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<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/nov/08/gardens-of-eden-the-church-forests-of-ethiopia-aoe>