

Christ Church, December 11th, 2011 (Conclusion of Placement)

John 1: 6-9, 19-29

Pointing to the Light

I've never really *got* John the Baptist. I mean, beyond a life of profound, yet strange eccentricity and gladly trumpeting another, I've wondered what is his place in the scheme of things and why the seemingly senseless tragedy?

I don't think I'm much closer to answering my own questions but I've certainly come to a greater respect of late of one who models something really vital and important to us, I believe; a life of remarkably humble, if not reverent responses before the always coming mystery or light that we name God: in this biblical context, the God enfleshed, the God, fully at home (fully alive) in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

Indeed, he understood his faith vocation, his life calling, no less, as pointing toward that dawning, kindly light, even as his own person was being more and more filled and shaped by it.

And so I wonder, if that is not our essential calling also, in its simplicity, that as individuals or as a community - week by week - sustaining an open and respectful deposition before the Holy, the Numinous, the Sacred, the Christ, however we might experience and understand that experience which is difficult enough to put into words. And by virtue of that reverence, we then become evangelical about its gifting's, expectant of its transformations, small and large, and intentional about a growth of person(s) away from the small and petty self with its endless demands for attention, growing toward the larger Self, notable for the daring heart, an exploring mind and the yearning, compassionate soul.

In my own experience, little or none of this growth comes quickly or easily, given the various fire-walls, interactive layers within the person that is Sean Gilbert.

Yet as Paul Tillich helpfully wrote, without openness of soul – space for “otherness”, Sacred, or Transcendence, there can be little or no transformation or change within us. Such is the catalytic effect of the Holy. And while the Christian church and its clergy may struggle to mediate or facilitate this reality, given our fixation on right belief or right behaviors, our own experience or recognitions can help greatly; when there is awe, or where there is unbridled joy, or where there is beauty in our passion and love for others, here then (in the unmediated or controlled experience) *is* the ever-coming light to receive, yet also to give bold testimony or witness to. Not as dogma or not as a belief system but

as a deep relational knowing based on what has given life and spirit to our own heart and mind.

And of course here lies the great paradox; the marvel, the Grace: for that which is Holy or Numinous, that who is Christ and Spirit to us, does not remain external, therefore unrelated. No, the deepest, most illuminated, most holy comes to dwell with and within us; the message of Advent / Christmas! And by doing so, religion and religious practice can take on an entirely different shape within the human psyche, if we allow it to be so.

And as part of that religious practice, religious leadership - a leadership worth its salt - need carefully understand its role by not confusing itself with such converting presence. Or placing ourselves in such positions that would have us unhealthily take on that Presence for others.

It's a tricky business this one, and whilst I'm deeply grateful for the tributes of late and for this service of celebration / conclusion, my sincere hope is that I have to the best of my ability, constantly pointed your attention to the Holy: Author of Love, the Companion in life and Guide for our Journey. *The Trinity of love, no less*. For before such beauty and hope I am utterly undone, I am rendered speechless and rendered almost null and void, and believe me, gladly so.....

St. Augustine, a towering figure in the western history of the church and a person of no small amount of complexity (hang-ups, we may also say) was found out - undone - by this grace that comes to him and renders all his cleverness and giftedness null and void and he writes this:

"Late have I loved you,
O Beauty so ancient and so new,
late have I loved you!

You were within me, but I was outside,
And it was *there* that I searched for you....
You were with me, but I was not with you....
You called, you shouted and you broke through my deafness.
You flashed, you shone, and you dispelled my blindness.
You breathed your fragrance on me
I drew in breath and now I pant for you.
I have tasted you, now I long and thirst for more.
You touched me, and I burned for your peace".

Wow! What an amazing confession, testimony to the always coming light, arising not from a doggedness of will, or a self righteous heart, or even a brilliant mind. No, this is testimony born of deep outrageous graces, converting testimony born of the discovery of that which has always held and led us, and always will.

The thread, the golden thread.....

Reverence, humility and correspondingly, a boldness, if not an eloquence of testimony – the poet in us all - shaped by the only real story we know; that is our own.

And it's that human story, that God-given, and God honored story, we bring before the sacredness of this table this morning, to be sustained and inspired for life's sake. And it's that story that will always be the basis of our witness. It won't be "Look at me, look at me". No, rather see the one who comes as kindly light. See the One who has filled us with much needed light. Will you not come and gaze on this wonder, this Beauty, and this goodly grace with me?