

Sermon Notes

**St Mark's Anglican Church
South Hurstville**

**Pentecost 22
28 October 2007**

**Preacher
The Reverend Chris Albany
Rector**

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

Freed to experience eternal life

A little boy was overheard praying:
"Lord, if you can't make me a better boy, don't worry about it.
I'm having a real good time like I am."

The more I hear some Christians speak about what is required for a person "to be saved" the more I despair. Have they not heard and understood the good news of the Gospel – its radical simplicity, its overwhelming generosity, the amazing grace (to use the phrase of the familiar hymn) that is at its centre and which makes it the radical good news that it is.

The way some Christians speak salvation comes with a whole lot of baggage. It's as though their answer to the certain ruler's, of today's gospel passage, question "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Let there be no mistake about it – the ruler is saying how do I earn, make sure that I deserve eternal life? Its as though their answer is, "Well there is a whole lot of things you must do and others which you shouldn't. In particular there's a long list of don'ts which all in all make it sound as though life in this would is not to be enjoyed and celebrated.

As Bishop Michael Hough says on today's newsletter 'it would be nice to have a limited list for entry into the Kingdom. The kind of list that goes 1,2,3,4 and no more'. However I want to change what he says next when he says 'there are no limits to the demands of the Gospel – it makes it sounds as though God can never be pleased as though there is an unceasing call to do yet more. I would prefer to say there is a mystery about the demands of the Gospel. A mystery which has to do with the free response that abundant love elicits from us Bp Hough is right when he says "the Gospel is a call to live a life of faith, where what is believed enriches and finds its ways into all our actions'. And then in linking the life of discipleship to being in need and dependent , like a child. "If we know our limits, if we understand our vulnerability. If we can come to terms with our failures, then there is a possibility of our needing God – then discipleship can begin. We cannot live a life of faith by simply ticking off the things (sins) we have avoided. We need to live a life of faith in which God has a place in all that we do."

Jesus' response to questions such as that of the 'certain ruler' is quite clear and unambiguous. "Sorry guys there isn't anything you can do to earn – deserve eternal life" – it's a free gift – to be accepted received as the gift it is. One can only do that if one has a child's openness and simplicity and joy. Its easier to be childlike to have the openness to receiving a free gift if poor – much harder if rich – For if one is rich one is inclined be self-sufficient – feel need to pay for it – to in some way reciprocate so as to not be in debt.

We Christians have so often built up a sense that one needs to earn God's acceptance that have to measure up to whole set of criteria – about morality and behaviour to others and in terms of piety and religious practice.. One of the sad things coming out of my experience is that often it is more religious people who are most anxious when confronted with their dying and possible death. – It is as though they fear that will be found wanting and God's will say, "sorry you don't measure up." So often it is the less overtly religious who reveal greater inner contentment

The whole point of the good news is that we don't have to measure up in order to earn salvation – “salvation is a gift” which is offered to us by God in Christ. All we need do is to reach out and accept it and allow ourselves to experience the reality that we are loved – valued – treasured – forgiven – The experience of being so loved can free us – to live joyously – compassionately – freely. Now that doesn't mean an invitation to licence and hedonism.

What I have been talking about has been entering into the experience of eternal life in the here and now. Once we do so we find that affects the whole of our living. We find ourselves responding to the grace and love of God and seeking to live our lives in a way that is pleasing to God – we measure up in grateful response.

St Augustine 1600 yrs ago had something to say about all this. He is often quoted to have said “Love God and do what you like”. What he actually said in his 7th Homily on the 1st Epistle of John is...

“Such is the force of charity. See that it alone discriminates, it alone distinguishes the doings of men.

8. This we have said in the case where the things done are similar. In the case where they are diverse, we find a man by charity made fierce; and by iniquity made winningly gentle. A father beats a boy, and a boy-stealer caresses. If you name the two things, blows and caresses, who would not choose the caresses, and decline the blows? If you mark the persons, it is charity that beats, iniquity that caresses. See what we are insisting upon; that the deeds of men are only discerned by the root of charity. For many things may be done that have a good appearance, and yet proceed not from the root of charity. For thorns also have flowers: some actions truly seem rough, seem savage; howbeit they are done for discipline at the bidding of charity. Once for all, then, a short precept is given you: Love, and do what you will: whether you hold your peace, through love hold your peace; whether you cry out, through love cry out; whether you correct, through love correct; whether you spare, through love do you spare: let the root of love be within, of this root can nothing spring but what is good.”

To conclude our reflection on this Gospel passage I am moved to pose the question, “What is eternal life?” Not life for ever and ever with Jesus in the future after death. It's about a quality of life. A radical different quality of life – more rich and full and complete and we can begin to experience it and display its qualities here and now in this world, though never experience it fully in this life.

One of the characters in “Mister God this is Anna” says only the real preparation for death is real living. ie– living to the full – with integrity and authenticity. Being fully and freely ourselves. Loving wastefully because that is our experience of how God loves us.

The message of today's gospel is that this living life to full and entering into Kingdom life entails a letting go of attachments ie of wealth of relationships, of possessions, of power, of status, for they get in the way of our receiving 'salvation' as a free gift that it is and seduce us into thinking we can, more than *can*, think we *must* somehow earn or pay for or deserve 'eternal life'. Let go of that illusion – it is not necessary!

And joyously allow yourself to be freed to begin to experience and display the qualities of eternal life here and now.

Love, joy, peace, mercy, the pursuit of justice and hope: may they be yours in full measure.