

Sermon Notes

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

Christmas 1 (Quintessential)

Preacher

Baptism of Jonah Hobart

The Reverend Chris Albany

30 December 2007

Rector

Readings: Isaiah 63.7-9; Matthew 2. 13-23

Unconditional love

One of my vivid memories when our children were young is of one of them standing legs akimbo, hands on hips and saying, “You’re not the boss of me. I’m the boss of me.” And that at the age of about 7. Now I suspect Jonah hasn’t quite got to that stage yet, though I’m told that things like that seem to be happening at a younger and younger age – so watch out!

We live in a world in which many people or institutions lay claim to our allegiance. Political parties, Church, family, work, school, football club, the nation. The question can be asked of each one of us, “Who is the boss of you?” Or to put it even more starkly, “who or what owns you?” What or who is it that controls you and your life and tells you how to live? Parents often seek to do this for their children and the children often feel controlled by their parents even into adulthood. Many of us allow our parents to control what we do in all sorts of subtle ways. Yet our parents do not own us. If our parents don’t own us then who does? Spouse Society-Culture –Nation-Church all of these claim ownership at various times and set out vigorously to enforce these claims. But none of them is valid. The Christian insight is that it is God who owns us; this is reflected in the baptism service when in a few minutes time I will mark Jonah with the sign of the Cross and say, “I sign you with the sign of the Cross to show that you are marked as Christ’s own forever.” As some of you have heard me say before in one South American baptismal liturgy this is stated most graphically with the words that the priest says I brand you with the sign of the cross so that the world will always know and you will never be able to deny to whom you belong. But God’s ownership is different to all other forms of ownership that lay claim to our lives-God does not own us in order to control us but rather to prohibit other claims of ownership. He turns the control of my life over to me, as a gift and we are called to be stewards of that gift. In effect then we own ourselves, and God honours and protects this ownership as he calls us into relationship with God self. A relationship of love and there is no compulsion in love-that would be a contradiction. God invites us, calls us to live our lives fully freely and offers God self as our constant companion, guide, strength. That’s what the Incarnation, which we have just celebrated is all about. God identifying with us in all the nitty gritty of life. Life in all its precariousness and vulnerability – with all its pain and anguish as well as its joys.

That gospel passage is a stark reminder that the gospel is not just about sweetness and light. That Jesus birth was in the midst of a world of oppression and tyranny. With despots such as Herod ordering the slaughter of children that Matthew records. But the gospel is about invitation into a relationship of love. At Jesus’ baptism the Gospel’s record that God’s voice is heard saying “This is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” (Or in whom I delight)

We too are called and chosen as the beloved who share in the same unconditional love that Jesus experienced at his baptism. The baptismal liturgy tells us that in baptism we are made a child of God having the freedom to address God as Abba, Father – Daddy. So often, our response is, “but I don’t deserve God’s love and how dare I call God a name like Daddy? It is just a bit too familiar,

irreverent. It might be true that we are or at least feel unworthy, but the reality is we have already captured Daddy's attention and we are indeed loved unconditionally as Abba's beloved.

Albert Haase, the Franciscan writer, in his reflection on Jesus' baptism in his book on the Lord's prayer "Swimming in the Sun" comments, "that is probably the hardest fact to absorb in the spiritual life. The unconditional love of God is so mind-boggling that some people try to rationalise away the "unconditional" part. They say God loves them "as long as they are good", they believe divine love is conditional and that we have to live up to certain requirements in order to be confident of it."

Writing of God's unconditional love Thomas Merton states, "One of the keys to real religious experience is the shattering realisation that no matter how hateful we are to ourselves we are not hateful God... We need to see good in ourselves in order to love ourselves. God does not. God loves us not because we are good but because God is." Unlike our fragile human love the love of God is not fickle conditional based upon expectations and hidden agendas. It is literally like the air we breathe. It is inside us, as we exist in it. It is like to rays of the sun, which shine upon us even on the rainiest of days and whose reflection off the moon guides us in the dark night. We cannot live without it. Existence is the abundance of divine love. Haase asserts Christmas which we have just finished celebrating is *the* feast of an Insatiable Divine love for humanity, of a captivated, fixated Lover wanting to be present, wanting to touch and share the very experiences of the beloved, wanting to become what is loved. From the Franciscan perspective Christmas is not the beginning of righting wrongs or cancelling debts. Which is the focus some Christians give the Jesus event. It is the culmination of a love story, which began with the dawn of creation. We like Jesus are first and foremost the Beloved. That awareness should transform us like Jesus into lovers.

Haase in a subsequent section of his book tells the story of a 27 year-old young man, Joseph, who was depressed, suicidal, running after every cheap thrill he could think of in order to escape his own inner pain and a self-hatred, - alcohol, gambling, sex and drugs (you name it, he'd tried it), whose life was turned around and transformed through the experience of being loved by a young woman. One day the young woman had blurted out "I think I am in love with you Joseph" the young man says "to be honest that's when I first really noticed Mary Jo and a funny thing started to happen. After she said that it was like someone freed me from prison. I stopped fighting against life and came out of my depression. Her love not only challenged me to accept myself but as a result of that I gradually became the person I guess I am meant to be." Joseph then added a profound statement, "when I now think about the first-time Mary Jo told me she loved me I can't help but think that she was looking at me with the eyes of God."

Joseph is right. Jesus does not have the corner on the market of enfleshing God's love. We are called to do that constantly for each other. Joseph's experience of Mary Jo's love - anyone's experience of human love is not somehow just like the experience of God's love, it is the love of God, though always incomplete and at times broken and even distorted. Whenever a person says to me, "I love you" that person is looking at me with the eyes of God.

As Haase says "God so loved the world that the saving word still becomes flesh." It is to that God that Jonah is brought today. That he may share in God's overwhelming, all-embracing love. It's our role to help that to happen, to nurture and support and encourage Jonah that he might come to know and experience God at the core of his being. To do that - how? Why by loving him of course.

In the name of God. Amen