



Wed 2 March 2016

The following sermon was delivered on Saturday 28 February 2016 by the Revd Dr Andrew Cameron, Director of St Mark's National Theological Centre, at a service for the ordination of deacons.

The Bible readings were Isaiah 61.1-3a, Romans 12.1-12, Matthew 20.25-28

The number of you as a group excites and encourages us greatly. And you are the first group in whose formation at St Mark's I have been substantially involved. So I am personally overjoyed to see you all.

But if each of you were the only one here today, we would be no less overjoyed by the work of God in you. Because you are signalling you considered intention today to inhabit a Christ-like life.

For those unfamiliar with the Bible, it turns out that Jesus chose as his mission statement the passage about speaking good news, binding up hearts, releasing captives, proclaiming God's favour.

Famously, he slams the book shut (as it were) just prior to the line about proclaiming God's vengeance. We know he believed in that. But it is as if to say: 'I'm not here for that. I'm here, right now, for all the other.'

So also at the other end of his ministry, almost like bookends: that to be with him entails losing the need to dominate, and aligning with his mission 'to give his life as a ransom for many': Father, Son and Spirit saving the oppressed and captives, finding a way through the need for just vengeance, with the Son serving us in his death.



You are configured by all that, now. You hold forth all that, now. You are the boundary-riders of our church, now, serving release and healing and forgiveness to the oppressed and captives and to those who could be under judgment, were it not for Christ's gifts to them.

In a sense I know you know this. You could not have come thus far without already inhabiting that way of being. Our liturgy today makes clear that we only recognise what God has already done in you.

But I also confess to a concern for you today.

We each only hear this call, and appropriate it, through the lenses of our own predispositions.

- If I am someone with a diminished sense of self, I hear the call to serve, and then easily lose myself in others in that service.
- If I am someone prone to impressing others, I hear the call to be zealous, and then overextend myself into perfectionism.
- If I am someone who has experienced little compassion, I hear the call to care, and then set out to rescue others from what I take to be the same lack of care, as if that must surely be their kind of oppression too.
- If I am someone given to rumination, I hear the call to a transformed mind, and then give myself to excessive talking and theorising about the proper Christian mind.

In other words: I sense multiple ways in which those aligning themselves with Christ's service, then so take it upon themselves as to lose themselves, and lose hope, and even sometimes to feel that they have lost Christ.

We name that with various psychological categories, such as burnout, or stress, or anxiety. And while I respect and uphold the insights in those categories, I wonder if our problem begins upstream, in the way we first hear and feel this call.

And perhaps as a useful test for you, may I ask: what was the net effect upon you of hearing those three readings? Did they settle upon you with such a weight of earnest solemnity that you feel, almost already, somewhat overwhelmed?

Perhaps another such test: did you feel some cumulative weight in all the *doing words* here? Ministry. Teaching. Exhorting. Generosity. Diligent leading. Compassion. Cheerfulness.

Holding fast. Loving. Honouring. Ardent zeal. Serving. Rejoicing. Patience. Suffering. Persevering. Praying.

If you only heard the doing words, then how we inhabit this call becomes all about our activity, all about our own doing-words.

And in a church spread thin, in a broken world full of need, in a modern Australia characterised by exploitative and competitive and bureaucratised work places, all dedicated to limitless growth ... that kind of endless doing begins to sound very far from captives freed, broken hearts healed, a people under God's favour, a people ransomed and served.

I want to go on to suggest something that I know can't be said simplistically and easily. As I watch the workplaces we inhabit, in every sector including churches, I've become deeply conscious that they resemble new forms of oppression, and captivity, and imprisonment.

That might strike you as fanciful. After all, we're not North Korea. No one forces Australians to do what we do.

And in important respects, captivity and bondage should perhaps be understood as referring to the poor and marginal and displaced in this world, and to spiritual oppressions such as standing under the judgment of God, or suffering under dark supernatural forces. For me to imagine it as referring to modern workplace conditions might seem to be an abuse of what Isaiah had in mind twenty-eight centuries ago.

But I believe modern Australians are oppressed and enslaved by the *spiritual* stories we all share.

- That our worth consists in productivity, no matter the cost.
- That our shame consists in underperforming.
- That our excellence consists in efficiency, and growth, and in personal and professional development.
- That our integrity matters less than the proper observance of burgeoning compliance laws.

We are one of the most affluently enslaved people the world has ever seen.

You deacons will go to your tasks having imbibed that milieu, amplified further by what feels like such scarcity of resource, all under the enormity of serving Christ.

The counter to that can't be simplistic. It may take a lifetime. But I wonder if it begins by listening again. For I don't see merely a list of doing words here.

I see the call for you to become someone who through the cacophony of tasks assailing us, **discerns God**: to find the good, acceptable, and perfect will of God. In other words, to discern less activity and more of what matters.

I see a call upon you not 'think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment' -- challenging not only moments of lordly pride, but also those habits of over-ambition and overreaching and perfectionism, noticing with sober judgment whom God has made us to be.

I see a call here to recognise the goodness of God in that '*not* all the members have the same function'; precisely in that no **one** person is called to ministry *and* teaching *and*

exhorting *and* generosity *and* diligent leading *and* compassion *and* cheerfulness. The ministry of this diaconal service is to honour you simply for what you are, rather than to demand of you what you are not.

I see us being surprised here with **news**, that, despite whatever narratives of productivity and worth and shame and growth might plague us, Someone came to serve. To speak kindly to the oppressed. To bind and heal broken hearts. To release captives. To un-condemn the condemned and shame-filled.

I hope you delight in representing to others what he does, but only once you have received and are receiving what he always does for you.

And so to me it seems that loving one another with mutual affection; outdoing one another in showing honour; not lagging in zeal; being ardent in spirit; serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope; being patient in suffering; persevering in prayer ... to me it seems that these are not merely a list of more doings.

They are what can come upon someone who has been served and released and healed by Jesus Christ.

These are responses we are released into. They are what come upon a person who no longer needs to compete, whose shame is put at rest, and who knows that God sets the conditions for hope, the end of suffering, and who gives our prayers a home.

These are the responses of a person freed from the terrible thought that the future of God's church is all up to me now.

Luther once famously advised: "do not rest upon yourself or [upon] your faith, [but] creep into Christ, [and] hide under His wings." [WA 10.1, 126 (1522).]

I pray that all your ministry of Christ's grace to the world will arise from Christ's ministry to you, speaking kindly to you, healing you, releasing you, forgiving you.

I pray that you'll know yourself in sober estimate, and find why God has given you to us to be you, and not someone else; and what it feels like to be released into the possibility of mutual affection, and joyful hope, and patience, and free-flowing prayer, because Someone came to serve even us.

Amen.