

Sunday 8 August 2010: Tenth Sunday after Trinity

Made For Goodness

Readings: Hebrews 11.1-3, 8-16; Luke 12.32-40

As many of you know, Nick our vicar is away on holiday, and sometimes when he's away, as a member of the clergy team, you strike lucky because the invitations that were meant for him fall to you. It was like that on Thursday when Nick had been invited to Coutts Bank with a group of five financial directors and trust fund manager to have a private lunch with Desmond Tutu. "Is there any chance you could go in my place?" Nick asked. "I think I may be able to possibly fit it in," I replied trying not to look too pleased. I arrived at Coutts bank in plenty of time, wearing my best suit, although Rod our church warden later told me my shirt had a frayed collar. "It's because we are the church ministering on the edge," I told him. Anyway my hosts did not mention my frayed collar - they could not have been more respectful. I was ushered into Coutts' beautiful foyer which is full of light – it's like a botanical garden with a pond full and huge ornamental koi carp. And then up to the director's flat where the group of financiers were gathering and whispering together in hushed tones. "I've just met him outside the bank," said one of the directors, "it took him about twenty minutes to cross the road, so many people wanted to talk to him." "What an incredible man he is," another whispered.

The man they were talking about was of course the Nobel Peace Prize winner - Archbishop Desmond Tutu - who was in the adjoining room being interviewed by the press. We waited for him, top London financiers and me, me a bit out of my league, waiting patiently like expectant fans for our hero. And then we were ushered in along with champagne, plates of smoked salmon and hollandaise sauce and wooden platters of tropical fruit. But we were all far too interested in Desmond Tutu to pay much attention to the food - Tutu, came round to press each one of our hands and giggle with delight. After a lengthy speech of welcome praising Desmond Tutu for his work for justice and peace Desmond Tutu had the chance to reply: "Ah" he said, his eyes flashing impishly, "I am not here for your praise, I am here for your cheques, large ones I hope!" He said this and roared with laughter. He had come to raise money for the Desmond Tutu Peace Centre in South Africa, an international centre being set up to promote world peace. We gathered in a circle around him as he spoke and answered questions. All eyes were on him, eager to hear his every word and each of his hosts eager to show their appreciation and support for all he was doing. It was brilliant to see a group of top financiers so inspired about a project for peace and ready to commit their talents to find the money.

"I want to ask you Archbishop, how it is through all the difficulties, conflicts and brutality you have encountered, how you have seemed to remain so joyful?" one of them asked. Desmond Tutu beamed: "I believe, despite all I have seen to the contrary, that as human beings we are made for goodness. Goodness changes everything, it changes the way we see the world, it changes the way we see others, it affects how we treat other people. It affects the quality of life for each and all of us. What is the quality of this planet? It is nothing more than the sum total of our daily interactions. Each human kindness enhances the quality of life. Each cruelty diminishes it." It was difficult, gathered as we were around Tutu, like disciples around a master, not to feel as though we were all some how lit up by his glow, this sense of goodness setting free the generosity of the human Spirit and the desire to pledge support for the South African Peace Centre. And in my heart, I longed for the same pledges of support not only for Desmond Tutu and South Africa but also for the poor of every nation and of course our own poor here at our door: my mind flooded with the headlines of this last week: the families of asylum seekers in this country raided in the early mornings and awaiting

deportation from our country; the Iranian and the Afghani who have lived in this country for years since boys, facing being thrown out - who both separately told me on the phone this last week "I have no where to go... I have no home but here, how can they throw me out?" Or the news from abroad - the terrified victims of the floods in Pakistan, millions of them waiting for help, victims of conflict now victims of a natural disaster beyond our imaginings, or the Iranian women caught in adultery and the young Iranian accused of homosexuality both sentenced to death, or the almost daily tally of terrible fatalities in Afghanistan each of which will have torn the lives of their families apart including the death last week of Karen Woo the Christian doctor from London executed in Afghanistan among 10 medical aid workers. I thought of all those locked in conflict and cycles of poverty - human beings made for goodness. Yes made for goodness **if only**, if only we could recognise it.

Our Gospel today is a call to attentiveness. A call to be watchful and awake so that we do not miss the master when he comes. Jesus says do not be afraid little flock, for it is your father's pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give alms for the poor. For where your treasure is there will your heart be also.

I think of this welcome for Desmond Tutu, how they did it with such respect, attention and graciousness and yet there was never a moment when we did not realise that it was Tutu who was gracing us, and that to welcome him, was to receive an hundred-fold in return. There is a reversal taking place in the Gospel. Perhaps it is something cultural but we have grown blind to its truth. In the Gospel it is often the host rather than the guest who is portrayed as the one who is the recipient of blessing because the host is blessed by the presence of the guest. I think of the Iranian and Afghani who have sought sanctuary from violence in this country - it is they who have graced us.

I remember once thirty years ago holding a party when I was a student at my digs. Very few people showed up. On the table there were about 40 wine glasses I had hired for the event many of which remained unused. "Those wine glasses look rather sad don't they," said one of the guests, she was right, and I remember feeling rather humiliated. I have never forgotten how it is the guest who honours us by accepting our hospitality. All the way through the Gospel we are reminded of this. "Send them away to buy their own food" the disciples tell Jesus but Jesus refuses - he honours the 5000 who have gathered - feeding them with loaves and fish. Enough for everybody to be filled, with twelve baskets left over. The woman who anoints his feet with oil washes them with her tears, dries them with her hair becomes the symbol of the true disciple. "You did not show this love Jesus" says to his host Simon the Pharisee. Jesus honours the despised tax collector Zaccheus by asking to become the guest in his house, the two disciples on the road to Emmaus recognize the risen Christ only when they have invited the stranger into their home.

Attentiveness to the guest is fundamental to the Christian message. I am constantly struck by how we are called to live a Gospel of generous welcome and in living it we are blessed by it for we are blessed by the presence of others. Did not Jesus tell us whatever we do for our Brothers and Sisters we do it for Christ. This is not a smug statement of self righteousness but a discovered truth. A giving and a receiving, a receiving and a giving. Again and again when we are attentive to the lives of others and discover their goodness, we also discover that we too are made for goodness. St Benedict in his foundational rule for monastic life stresses the vital importance of the guest, the guest must be welcomed, for the guest is Christ.

In an individualistic competitive society we have often learnt to fear the stranger. Ants and savages and the lynch mob, however modern, are suspicious of strangers, they can put strangers and scapegoats to death, or at least want them banned or locked up or deported, or

stoned - rather seeing that they are a gift to us. But Christ's call again and again is to open wide our hearts, to listen, to see, and to discover, often when we are least expecting to find him - Christ present in our midst. Desmond Tutu is Desmond Tutu or Nelson Mandela is Nelson Mandela not because of the prestige they now receive but because back in the time they were still considered agitators, trouble makers, blacks who threatened the status quo - they were not poisoned by hatred and bitterness. They continued and still continue to reach out across the divide to welcome the stranger home: bringing grace and peace to others and full of grace themselves. I have noticed that it is often the so called poorest that provide the most wonderful hospitality. How joyful those moments when self and fear are put aside and we discover the goodness of another, the treasure in our midst. The gift of connecting with another whether it be a moment of recognition, a respect, a friendship, a love or the beauty, passion, and tenderness of physical intimacy, all these things can speak to us of Christ the well spring of life. Are we not deeply fortunate to live in this vibrant multi cultural city of London? Is not the inclusion of the stranger our blessing?

Our Gospel today is simple and direct, be ready, be attentive, we do not know when Christ is coming. Christ, who offers himself today in bread and wine, is here in our midst. In these pews, down in St Martin's Hall, out there on the street, queuing outside the Connection, in your own home waiting to be welcomed, waiting to be received. Jesus tells us: "be ready for action and have your lamps lit." "Welcome the guest like we welcomed Desmond Tutu for each one of us are made for goodness." And if you are serving smoked Salmon and Champagne, or Nelson Mandela's coming for tea, don't forget to invite us too. Amen.