

LENT STUDY 2017 – CONSCERATED TO THE LORD
IV. CALLED TO HOLINESS

Key Scripture passages:

John 17

1 Peter 1:13 – 2:10

Thoughts on the theme

Thérèse of Lisieux was a Carmelite nun in 19th century France. She entered the Order at age 15, and died at the tragically young age of 24. She was greatly affected by Thomas à Kempis' *Imitation of Christ* and pondered much on the idea of the kingdom of God within, which brought her a great calm. She devoted herself to a life of prayer within the convent at Lisieux, and discovered the works of John of the Cross.

Thérèse yearned for a sense of perfection, and to live as a saint before God. She came to realise that that she could not attain the perfection of sainthood through heroic deeds as she had imagined it, but could make her way to God through little steps. Indeed to get there she needed to remain little, to become less. She called this her "Little Way".

The writer Richard Rohr suggests that in doing Thérèse reminds the Church of a "spirituality of imperfection". He writes that "*We grow spiritually much more by doing it wrong than by doing it right.*"

We can be slow to accept or understand this. In spite of our affirmation of a gospel of grace, we often act to please God and to prove ourselves before God. Yet the gospel tells us that the last shall be first, and that the greatest in the kingdom of God is the least. And St Paul tells us that God's strength is found in human weakness, and God's wisdom is found in human willingness. Our way is the way of the cross, to human eyes a way of failure and disdain.

This is challenging stuff for those of us who strive for high standards and are hard on ourselves when we do not attain to our own ideals of perfectionism. We are easily disappointed and dissatisfied with things, especially ourselves. As Thérèse learned this about herself, she reversed her path to holiness, and realised that the path lies only in our participation in the life of Christ and the willingness to accept the mercy and forgiveness of God. It is then that we discover the power to live in a way that can be described as holy. We cannot please God by standing far off, pursuing our own works of perfection.

This is a work of prayer, and something worked out in community, where our rough edges rub up against one another, and we can exercise and experience forgiveness and mercy.

Scripture Study Notes

John 17

Chapters 14-16 of John's gospel contain Jesus' farewell discourse to the disciples. In chapter 17, Jesus offers an extended prayer for himself and for the disciples. The prayer is a whole, though it is possible to discern a movement in it. The movement is from Jesus and his desire for his glorification, to the disciples and their sanctification and unity to fulfil God's purposes, and finally to the generation of believers that will follow from them.

This movement shows some parallels with what we found in the Creation narrative, in that Jesus reveals an intrinsic link between God, himself and the human community of disciples. God will not abandon these people, who have been called to work out the purposes of God in Creation.

Note that the glorification which Jesus seeks is not about status in the way that human beings may understand glory. It is a reference to his passion and death, through which the gift of eternal life, that is the knowledge of God, will become attainable.

The main part of the prayer is directed at the disciples. They have depended heavily on the presence of Jesus with them, and he will soon be gone from them. Jesus prays for their protection in what is to come. They are to be sent into the world just as Jesus was sent. And in the same way that Jesus has confronted evil, so the disciples will face the same struggle.

Jesus' prayer is that God will sanctify them in the truth. Sanctification has to do with ideas of being set apart, and made holy. These themes were present in our earlier consideration of Aaron's ordination (Exodus 28) in the first study. There, priests were set apart in an identifiable way in order to make visible the presence of God. Here the idea is not dissimilar. When John's gospel speaks of "truth" it is the particular truth of God being made known through Christ. Disciples are being set apart for this task.

Thus the prayer concludes for the generations of believers who will follow this first group. All will be caught up in this same belonging to God in Christ, which we know as the communion of saints. The task remains the same, that in each generation the knowledge of God is passed on and proclaimed afresh.

1 Peter 1:13 – 2:10

Peter's letter is addressed to a wide audience, described as the "exiles of the Dispersion". It is a Jewish idea, and possibly a Jewish audience is intended. However, as we saw in the third study, Peter's experience means he holds a much broader vision of the gospel's reach.

The letter opens with a celebration of the gift of new birth made possible through the resurrection of Christ. This is also a source of strength to these believers who it seems have suffered for their

faith. Peter is clear that with this grace comes a call to holy living, which has perhaps become more difficult in the face of persecution. The source of this holiness is God who is holy. Those who belong to God are to reflect the nature of God in their living.

This holiness is exhibited through the genuineness of the love they are to show one another. The call to rid themselves of malice, guile, insincerity, envy and slander implies division and dysfunction within these communities. The idea is of “putting off”, like old clothing exchanged for new. The list does not reveal anything about the particular nature of the problems that were being faced. They are the kind of things that have beset the Church in every generation, and which mitigate against the building of effective Christian community life. This in turn is an impediment to the making known of God’s mighty acts, which is the purpose for which the Church has been called into being.

Questions for Discussion

- In both of the readings from John 17 and 1 Peter, the focus is almost exclusively on the corporate life and witness of Christian disciples. We live in a society which more often stresses individual autonomy and achievement. How easily do we integrate our individual spiritual life and our participation in church life?
- In what ways can the church be a counter-cultural force to challenge the current individualist tendency to narcissism and isolation?
- *“I continue to dream and pray about a revival of holiness in our day that moves forth in mission and creates authentic community.”*
These words of John Wesley from the late 18th century deserve attention in the early 21st century. What would such ‘holiness’ look like which was expressed in mission and authentic community? In what ways would it differ from the church you know today?
- Peter’s first epistle is rich in metaphors for our participation in the Church: Newborn infants (2:2); Living stones and holy priesthood (2:5); Chosen race, royal priesthood, holy nation, God’s own people (2:9). If you could choose one, which would it be, and why?