

21 November 2010

Christ the King C

Sermon notes:

Colossians 1.11-20

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Conventional wisdom has it that “patience is a virtue”. This is not something we usually happily tell ourselves while we are waiting; more often it’s declared by the person we are waiting on, and so the saying generally serves as a way of trying to keep us a distance until our time, or turn, comes. Whatever the case, I want to spend some time thinking about what it means to be patient and, in particular, in what specifically *Christian* sense it might be that patience *is* virtuous.

In our reading from Colossians this morning, the writer prays for two things for the Colossian believers – that they might be made strong with the strength that comes from God’s own power, and that they might be prepared to endure everything in patience. This caught my attention first because I’d been thinking of patience as a general theme to explore in the season of advent and, second, because it seemed to me that to pray for both patience and for strength is contradictory, for these two things can be understood to be opposites.

We might, of course, speak of strength *for* patience, but this seems to me to be a bit premature; there is deeper understanding to be had if we keep strength and patience apart at least for a short time before rushing to bring them together. Patience, has to do with bearing suffering or some other deprivation without complaint. It is not the same as two other possible ways of enduring difficulty – despair and resignation. *Despair* is a way of enduring which *merely* endures. Despair knows of no hope, of no end to whatever it is which afflicts us. Despair truly suffers the absence of whatever is missing, and the suffering colours everything else. *Resignation* tends to be less debilitating than despair, but is not much happier. Resignation tolerates suffering and deprivation as a strategy of least resistance. At best it will be a brave acceptance of what cannot be changed, a stoic keeping-at-a-distance of the loss or suffering.

A third response to an experience of suffering is impatience, which demands a change of circumstances, or acts to bring such a change about; it is here that we come to the natural sense of what it means to have strength, and here also we can see how patience and strength can stand in contrast to each other. Impatience is a refusal to suffer, or to accept suffering, and,

whether successful or not, looks to exercise power to bring about a change. To be strong is to have the capacity to change your circumstances, whether it is physical strength, or the power which comes from money, political position or personal charm. Those who have the right kind of strength or power don’t *have* to patient. (We might note in passing the potentially violent character of impatience, which seeks to force its will on a situation or on people).

But this is not what Paul prays for when he prays for strength for the Colossian church, for the very prayer for patience implies that the strength to change their circumstances is not available. All that *is* available are the options for enduring: despair, resignation, patience or impatience. The strength Paul prays for is not the strength to change their circumstances but for what it takes for their circumstances to be experienced differently.

This different experience of patience has its grounds in what God has done in Jesus, effecting a reconciliation of the world to himself. For patience is not simple endurance of our circumstances but *reconciliation* with them. In fact, it will help to think of God’s reconciling work as God’s *patience* with the world. For God does not exercise power to change the world, whether to over-run it, or to marginalize it. God is not impatient with the world. God rather reconciles – literally, makes-friends-again-with the world – embracing the world and so declaring its value as it is.

Reading God’s reconciling work as an act of patience enables us to see how patience might become something more than mere endurance, for we also speak of God’s reconciling work as a work of love. God’s patience with the world is the work of healing love. Patience which takes its lead from God’s own patience is no longer a matter of simply *waiting*. We get our waiting – our enduring or time – right when we allow it to become space for loving and for being loved. Patience is the experience of time as a space for love – especially that time which we normally think we must simply endure.

Patience is rightly called a virtue not because it is convenient for the person we are waiting on but because we easily experience time as something quite other than the space for love – quite other than an occasion for patience. In fact, impatience becomes something of a hatred of time: sitting in traffic, waiting 10 extra seconds for a slow internet download, standing in a supermarket queue, “having” to pause to eat in the midst of a busy day. Here we get impatient with the passage of time, for it seems to be empty time – wasted time simply to be endured, time for *resenting* others because they are holding us up, rather than for compassion.

In being exhorted to patience we are not called to a dry endurance of time. The patience of the true human being does not simply endure but takes the space created by the passage of time and the people in it and rediscovers it as a rich field seeded with the stuff of life. God's patience *knows* the world, and chooses it as a partner for life. And so God calls a people, enters into relationship with them, wrestles with them, judges them, forgives them, sticks with them – enduring all things, even that people's total rejection of God in the cross.

Paul speaks of this in terms of the person of Jesus as the one in whom and for whom all things were created, the one who holds all things together. This is grand language for one we tend to limit to the confines of a carpenter in Palestine, but the point of Paul's language here is that we might catch a glimpse not only of the fullness of God in Christ, but the fullness of ourselves in God. God's love of Christ is God's patience with us, and this is the patience – the strength to love – that we are to have with each other.

By the grace of God may the virtue of patience, with its strength to love in the time we have been given, be ever more fully ours, to God's everlasting glory. Amen.