

II Samuel 11: 1-15

Psalm 14

Ephesians 3: 14-21

St. John 6: 1-21

Pentecost 10 2024.

---

“... that you may be full with all the fulness of God.”

Ephesians 3: 19b

John Shelby Spong was born in 1931 in North Carolina, USA. He grew up in a very strict – some would say fundamentalist – Christian home; his father was physically abusive of his mother. All his adult life, it seems to me, John Spong was living in reaction to his upbringing...

Ordained to serve in the Episcopal Church in the USA, he eventually became a bishop in New Jersey before retiring in 2000. People who were very theologically liberal loved him; those of us who are more theologically orthodox often found him very frustrating... He flaunted attempts to temper his opinions by the Episcopal House of Bishops, the Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, and others. He certainly seemed to be a man who was confident of his opinions; I think the Church would have been better off had Bishop Spong been more humble...

Although I have often found John Spong difficult to listen to or to read, I have to admit that he was a clever communicator, and he was known for his snappy quotes. You have likely heard at least one of them, as it was a popular expression in many Anglican circles a few years ago... He said, “The Church is a Come-As-You-Are party.” “The Church is a Come-As-You-Are party...”

As far as it goes, I believe that expression is true!... Whatever our social backgrounds, whatever the condition of clothes we wear, whatever pain or grief or bad experiences or addictions we had before we came into the community of the Church, we are welcome here... This is a place of safety. This is a place of belonging... No matter what our backgrounds are, we are invited to cross the threshold, to come and to listen and to see...

When I was a young man, I remember meeting an older woman who had grown up in deep poverty. I remember this woman telling me that her mother was ashamed to take her family to Church, because they were dressed in rags... She never learned the full story of the gospel of Jesus until she was an adult... That is the sort of ecclesiastical snobbery which John Spong was reacting against. The community of God’s Church is not just for middle-class people, but for everyone – for we are all sons of Adam and daughters of Eve; disobedient in various ways from the good plan of our Creator, and in need of salvation through Jesus Christ... Yes; it is fair to say the Church is a “come as you are” party. Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free, men and women are all welcome...

But that’s not the full story... This tells us the *beginning* of the story, but not its end...

Some of you are familiar with a friend of mine, the late Rev. John Pierce. John was an Anglican priest, evangelist and devotional writer, until his death in 2009... I remember when John Pearce first heard the expression, “the Church is a come-as-you-are party...”

John Pearce listened carefully, and nodded his head. “Yes,” John said. “The Church is indeed a come-as-you-are party...” “However,” he added, “it’s not a *stay*-as-you-are party...” That is to say, when we belong to the community of the Church, when we become disciples of Jesus Christ, we are called to be changed by the Holy Spirit of Jesus, to become the men and women you and I are called to be...

God’s desire is for us to be open to being transformed spiritually – to be born once again; to choose to leave behind the cheap baubles and trinkets which this world alone values. Instead, we are invited to choose to love and to serve in response to God’s great love for us, shown supremely in the perfect death and glorious resurrection of Jesus... In short, you and I are called to be changed by the Holy Spirit. We are expected to *take on* the character of Jesus Christ himself...

We are called to be changed. The Church is not a “stay as you are” party...

This is the point in today’s second reading. Paul writes that he wants his readers to be changed by the Spirit of Jesus Christ... That includes me. And that includes you... Ephesians 3: 16 reads, “I pray that, according to the riches of [God’s] glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit...” Let’s notice that it is *God* who changes us when we are open to him... We don’t save ourselves. God saves us, through the glorious gift of his Son, Jesus Christ. We are strengthened (we read here) by God’s Spirit...

Verse 17: “And that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.” Faith comes as we are rooted and grounded in God’s perfect love...

Next, verse 18: “I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth...” With all the saints (that is, with the entire congregation) to know the breadth and length and height and depth... Wait a moment!... What is that shape? What is the central Christian symbol which extends both tall and low, and from one side to another? It is the cross! It is the *cross* on which the Son of God gave his life that we are saved, and by his cross alone...

Verse 19: “and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God...”

These words are inspired by the Holy Spirit, and are authoritative for the faithful... God’s message, through St. Paul, is that we know the “love of Christ which surpasses knowledge.” (Head knowledge alone won’t bring us to God...)

Ephesians 3 is a positive message, about God working in us, to help make us beautiful.

Not all scripture is a positive message, of course. Today's *first* reading is about King David – how David committed adultery with Bathsheba, and when she got pregnant, David arranged for her husband Uriah to be killed in battle. David here is an example of moral disobedience, with tragic consequences...

The message of today's epistle reading, though, is positive – we be filled with “all the fullness of God.” It's so clear: You and I are called to be changed, to be transformed, by the Spirit of Jesus Christ. This is not something to be afraid of, but to embrace. In the wonderful words of the old Prayer Book, “his service is perfect freedom...”

So let's cooperate with God in this process of transformation, of change. We do this as individuals, and we undertake this change corporately as the community of the local parish within the catholic tradition... We gather here week by week to worship. And we gather to help one another grow tall and deep and far and wide like the cross, and to leave behind the sin which clings so closely. We are citizens of another country, the new Jerusalem. We're learning how to be beautiful and faithful and true, with God's help...

The closing words of the New Testament include these:

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city [the new Jerusalem; the global Church]... Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign for ever and ever...

The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come.'

And let everyone who hears say, 'Come.'

And let everyone who is thirsty come.

Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.

The one who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon.'

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

Let us pray...

Dear God,

Grant that every corner of our lives will be penetrated with your beautiful un-ending light.

This we pray in the Name of your risen Son, Jesus Christ.

Amen.