

## Sermon for Sixteenth after Trinity, 2021

Jeremiah 9:23-24. 1 John 2:13c-17. Psalm 71:1-6.  
Matthew 6:24-34.

**The Collect:** God, whose never-failing providence orders all things both in heaven and earth: we humbly beseech thee to put away from us all hurtful things, and to give us those things which are profitable for us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

1 John 2:15 ‘Do not love the world or the things in the world.’

Last week it was reported that Bishop John Spong had died. That might not mean much to you, unless you were keenly observing the US Episcopalian Church of the 1970s. Maybe you heard of the Bishop of Woolwich, John Robinson, who wrote ‘Honest to God.’ (1963)? In this book, Robinson concluded that there needs to be a radical restating of traditional orthodoxy in modern terms. In short, Jesus was a ‘paradigmatic man’, and worship should be recast as worldly holiness. He believed that man had come of age (intellectually) in the age of the ‘Enlightenment’ (17th and 18th Centuries). NT Wright’s analysis and critique of Robinson’s book is available on line ( <https://ntwrightpage.com/2016/04/05/doubts-about-doubt-honest-to-god-forty-years-on/> ). John Spong was Bishop of Newark, New Jersey, who wrote several books, the last called ‘Unbelievable: Why Neither Ancient Creeds Nor the Reformation Can Produce a Living Faith Today’ (2018). He proclaimed in his 12 theses, that believing that Jesus is an incarnation of a theistic deity is a bankrupt concept. Furthermore, God talk in liturgy and conversation is meaningless. Spong’s diocese declined under his ministry, eighty percent faster than the rest of the Episcopal Church.

Now, you might be wondering why either of these men bothered to remain christian, let alone bishops? As for the latter, nobody in the Episcopal Church had the temerity to call them to account; at least, no-one who had any authority to remove them. What sanctions could have been applied to them for preaching heresy, and why weren’t these applied? Perhaps you could make this the focus of your weekly studies?! However, lest we think that this type of bishop or clergy is a rarity, they appear, in some denominations, to be the majority; at least in terms of occupying positions of influence and power. Well might the psalmist remind us to pray: (71:1) ‘In thee O Lord have I put my trust: let me never be put to confusion.’ As the prophet Jeremiah records (9:23) ‘Thus says the Lord: “Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, let not the might man glory in his might, ... (but rather) that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord...’ St John also writes to strengthen the church of believers in their determination to be strong in the faith, know God, and to overcome the evil one and his temptations, by the word of God abiding in them.

It’s ironic that Bishop John Robinson had been a Cambridge Don and an esteemed New Testament scholar, before he was invited to take on the role of Suffragan of Woolwich. John Spong had not been a tenured academic, but, again ironically, had more than 500 honorary appointments as a visiting lecturer. So, a lot of universities thought enough about his books and publications to invite him to come for a while as a celebrity, but not enough to want him to stay! Nowadays, those with traditional orthodox theological views are not celebrated but ridiculed and denied a platform.

St John says: 'Do not love the world or the things of the world.' Is he saying we should be miserable, or malcontents? Not at all. St John recorded the most beautiful revelations of heavenly realities. He suffered a lot for his faith; miraculously surviving being boiled in oil in the Colosseum during the reign of the Emperor Domitian; then being banished to the isle of Patmos. We know that he was close to Jesus in life, and adopted as Mary's son at the foot of the cross. This closeness to God made it very clear to him that worldly things are fickle and prone to distract us from the love of God. They have a primeval attraction to our senses and can bewitch the mind. We are not immune to the world's effects; we are human.

But, we have the mental faculty to prioritise. The Father is *in* those who decide not to love and enjoy worldly pleasures at the expense of dependency on the love that comes to us from God. Jesus said: 'No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other.' (Mt 6:24). 'Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness', and the anxieties of life will be put in perspective.

If you were a bishop in the apostolic succession, what would you teach your flock? Would you, like John Spong, tell them that they should get over the concept of Jesus of Nazareth being the incarnation of divine reality? Should people choose a contemporary myth that suits their need to express themselves as they wish. Don't call your earthly father 'he', but 'they'. Perhaps Caligula set a precedence for the TV show 'Married at first sight.' When he was a guest at a wedding, he fancied the bride and took her home to marry; divorcing her two days later. Society doesn't seem to value marriage as a sacred estate as described by the Bible and the Prayer Book. If you are a bishop, do you not decide to change the Prayer Book to suit the fluid definitions of those who demand it? Sacraments then do not manifest divine reality, but depict human entertainment.

If you were Bishop Robinson, would you explain that worship of Almighty God is really acting out your own innate holiness in a communal way? Obviously, there is less call for this to be done with hymns in a church. Maybe a night club or a pub is more congenial to your expression of 'worship'. The teaching of the paradigmatic Jesus can be replaced by the less demanding creed of social media influencers? Change - 'In thee O Lord do I put my trust' to 'in celebrities, O my goodness, do I put my common sense'. Replace the Bible with Instagram!

Brothers and Sisters, sad to say, St John's injunction 'not to love the world or the things in the world,' has been corrupted to read 'love the world and the things in it'. Sadly, many who purport to be bishops in an apostolic line that includes St John, have chosen this same creed. What are we to do? We are to hold our nerve! God has built His Church on a Rock. Psalm 18:2 'The LORD is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer; my God, my strength, in whom I will trust; my buckler, and the horn of my salvation, and my high tower.' 1 Cor 3:11 'For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ.' We have a love of God's creation, and of His creatures, but we look beyond it for exemplary truth. Only the Holy Spirit can lead us into all truth. We need grace to be transformed in this life, and Jesus to forgive and redeem us so that we can enter heaven at the last. Have confidence that your Bishops of the ACC and their priests will be faithful to that which has been fruitfully entrusted to us all.

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.