

Sermon Notes from the Requiem Eucharist for Bishop Jim Cruickshank

Preached by the Very Reverend Peter G. Elliott

Christ Church Cathedral, Vancouver, British Columbia

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The Gospel according to Jim

In his clearly articulated directions for this funeral liturgy, Jim indicated “no eulogy”, and requested that I preach. Of course I will respect his request but how can we not speak about him today. So I’m grateful to the many of you who responded and sent me a few words expressing the Gospel according to Jim. I received over 50 emails with quotes and remembrances from so many of you describing how you heard the gospel from Jim: and it’s been a very moving experience to read them all.

What’s been amazing to me, but shouldn’t be surprising, is the consistency of what Jim taught. His presentation of the gospel was rooted in scripture, verified by his own journey, and seasoned with experience. At its heart, the gospel according to Jim can be summed up by one phrase which was repeated over and over again by so many who responded: “I am your God, You are my People, I will never stop loving you, I will never let you go.” This simple but profound expression of covenant theology was the heart of the Gospel according to Jim. As Bill Crockett expressed it, “The centre of the Gospel for Jim was God’s gift of grace. God loves us and accepts us unconditionally as a free gift of grace in Jesus Christ.”

This is the good news, news that’s so good that people can’t believe it’s true but it is. As Jim said, there is nothing we can do to make God love us more, and nothing we can do to make God love us less: God doesn’t know what it means not to forgive. It’s why, in his prayers, he always addressed the holy one as “gracious God.”

This open and inclusive theology was undergirded with a characteristic self-deprecating humour, and his light heartedness shone through so many of the stories that people recounted. For example, in his materials submitted prior to election as Bishop of Cariboo, his response to the question ‘describe your theology’, Jim simply wrote, “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.”

Or how about this one: when he served as Dean here, one day standing outside the cathedral, Jim was approached by a young woman asking if he wanted company. When he turned and she saw his clergy collar, she quickly apologized. But he responded graciously: “Oh, do you work this corner too?”

And then there was this story—after an ordination, Jim greeted the newly ordained young man at the door of the church with the words, “You will now receive the traditional greeting for all clergy: ‘Got twenny bucks, Rev’rnd?’”

In his speaking and preaching Jim used very homely examples. In an address on the passage from the letter to the Ephesians that was read earlier he was critical of what he referred to as the two swimming pool concept. This was the view held by some Christians that there is one swimming pool with clean and beautiful water in and there’s another ugly old pool with dirty water in it and those of us “Christians” who are in the clean pool are fishing for Christ and so we pluck people out of the dirty pool and put them into the clean pool when they get saved and become our kind. This two pool theology did not appeal to Jim: he believed that there’s just one great big pool and God sent his only Son to come into that pool as incarnate God to redeem and save us all. But after expressing that, he said something even more radical: that because both the two pool and the one pool theologies exist in the church what we’re called to do is to love each other despite our differences. That’s inclusive theology. As Archbishop Douglas Hambidge put it, “ Jim’s Gospel was all-embracing, all inclusive. There were no exceptions, and no outsiders, because for him this reflected God as Jim understood God.”

Jim loved questions. He thought questions were, in many ways, more important than answers because questions get us thinking, get us talking and he loved nothing more than a robust theological discussion. Amongst his favourite questions are:

How generous are you prepared to allow God to be?

How do you love someone with whom you profoundly disagree?

What truth do you want to be during your one life on this earth?

How are you going to live out the meaning of your baptism?

Good questions, searching questions—questions you can ponder for a lifetime.

His view of baptism was orthodox yet radical. Baptism, he taught, is counter to the ways of the world. The world says that we are born, we live and we die. But the Christian way understands it another way: we are born, we die at our baptism—buried in the living water of Christ...to live freely now and with Christ forever. We are born, we die and we live into eternity and nothing can separate us from that love. So if you’re free to die, Jim taught, you’re free to live and to give yourself over to serve the world God loves

Archbishop Privett remembered a youth conference Jim addressed in 1978 with the theme “Choose Life”. Jim invited the young people there—and how he loved to work with young people—to hear the call to choose the world, to choose Christ and to choose the church. His words were words to shape a life by, wrote John, and how many lives were shaped by Jim’s powerful presentation of the gospel.

The gospel according to Jim: God gave him a dream, just as God gave Jacob a dream of seeing a connection between earth and heaven. God gave him a message to proclaim of the giftedness of all the beloved baptized. And God gave him, as the gospel reading Jim chose—not surprisingly from Mark’s gospel—an experience of suffering both in his faithful and attentive listening to the pain of indigenous people in the residential schools, and in his struggles with his health in the last couple years of his life. In a profound way he knew in his experience, the meaning of Jesus words, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” That he did, faithfully because he believed, with all his heart and soul the words that we heard from him so often, “I am your God, You are my People, I will never stop loving you, I will never let you go.”

So it is to that God that today we commend Jim, our beloved teacher, pastor, bishop and friend. In his baptism he was marked as Christ’s own forever. And he would want us, this day, to be so strengthened by this Eucharist that each of us would be empowered to take our part in the healing of the world, to see in each person the image of Christ, and to know that we, like him, by God’s good grace are Christ’s own forever and ever and ever and ever and ever. Amen.

