

Malcolm Clemens Young
Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA 2A13
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Evensong #39 Alan Jones' 80th Celebration 5:15 p.m.
Thursday 5 March 2020

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16
Romans 4:13-18 [19-

Mark 8:31-36 [37]

Seeker of Truth

"Creator of the earth and skies to whom the words of life belong, grant us your truth to make us wise, grant us your power to make us strong" (Hymn 148).

Alan Jones once wrote, "When it comes to the story of my life, I want the deepest and best interpretation put on it by a sympathetic narrator." I read this many years ago and no one could feel more surprised and honored than I do to find myself in this position tonight. Alan is the best Dean Emeritus I could imagine. At every stage he has helped me in small matters and consequential ones. He has walked in my shoes and I'm profoundly grateful for his kind encouragement and wisdom.

Alan is one of the most prominent preachers of our time and tonight as we celebrate his birthday I want to consider what God shows us through his thought and life. I believe that Alan's power comes from his absolute dedication to truth. He courageously teaches us that the people you have to lie to, own you. He writes that, "The truth that makes us free, is for the most part, truth I prefer not to hear."¹

Alan speaks in a compelling way about the truth of spiritual struggle and darkness, of uncertainty and isolation. And yet his conclusions about beauty, humility and mystery have become a deep and hopeful part of us. Let me briefly explore each of those subjects to give you a sense for what I mean.

1. Beauty. At the very heart of Alan's message is a simple idea. He says that "life is a gift from God. It is all a gift." Surprisingly often on Thursday nights I imagine Alan at his first Evensong when he was only seven years old. No one could have imagined how he would serve the church over the next seventy-three years.

One of the things he learned early was that music and beauty help us to receive our life as a gift. In Alan's thought, gratitude for our existence comes before any other story or reasoning. He points out that what we attend to most is what most shapes our soul.² For him it is a spirit of thanksgiving to God.

2. Humility. Alan says frankly, "I have always preached to those who have lost their way." It just so happens that most of us fit right in to this category. You will rarely hear a

preacher who is as acutely conscious of his own sinfulness and the power of sin to distort human life. Alan does not hide his own brokenness.

Alan says, "As we get older, the full truth about ourselves involves a long story of mistakes, betrayals, loves, failures..." But he also points out that over time, "our longing for truth becomes more like a longing for integrity and forgiveness than the longing to rearrange the facts of the past in our favor." He says, "I would like to give the gift of my unguarded self."³

3. Mystery. I've never heard anyone point this out before but one of Alan's most frequently used expressions is "I haven't a clue." Alan honors the mystery of God and the mystery that we are to ourselves. He calls God "the great incomprehensible presence within each of us" and says that we are both more and less than we think we are.⁴

Alan quotes Gary Wills who writes, "We seek one mystery, God, with another mystery, ourselves. We are mysterious to ourselves *because* God's mystery is in us." Referring to a conversation between Ram Dass and himself, the two agree that, "The name of the game we are in is called 'Being at one with the Beloved.'"⁵

Beyond his theology Alan has also taught us that, "truth-telling creates a community of trust." And that is what Grace Cathedral is. It would be irresponsible if I did not point out some of the extraordinary things we accomplished as a community with Alan's guidance. Lauren Artress and Alan started the worldwide labyrinth movement. During Alan's tenure we responded valiantly to the AIDS crisis and built the Interfaith AIDS chapel. We started a yoga practice that hosts 600 people each week (perhaps the largest regular yoga practice in the world).

Grace Comm revolutionized how religion happens on the Internet and gave the Cathedral an outsized presence there. Under Alan's leadership we started the Forum and the simply miraculous Community Preschool.

At UC Berkeley there is a plaque in memory of the architect John Galen Howard which says something like, "His monuments stand all around you." That is true for Alan too. The garage, the crypt, the great stairs, the plaza, the chapter house, huge sections of CSB – these all consumed hundreds of hours of Alan's attention.

What we think of as the modern Grace Cathedral would be inconceivable without him and his vision of truth as a community project requiring vulnerability and faith.

In conclusion, Alan likes to tell the story of the playwright Arthur Miller writing about his wife Marilyn Monroe as she slipped into a terrible period of depression and paranoia. One evening watching his drugged and sleeping wife. Miller wrote, "I found myself straining to imagine miracles. What if she were to wake up and I were able to say, "God loves you darling" and she were able to believe it! How I wish I still had my religion and she had hers."

In response Alan writes, "God loves you darling comes closer to the absolute truth than any phrase I know."⁶ Thank you Alan for what you have taught us about gratitude and beauty, for your vulnerability, for opening a door to the greatest mystery. Life is a gift from God. It is all a gift.

¹ Alan is citing Michael Venture speaking in the Sun in September 1999. Alan Jones, *Living the Truth* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 2000) 101, xi.

² Ibid., 122, 153.

³ Ibid., 85, 120.

⁴ Ibid., 23.

⁵ Ibid., 134, 53.

⁶ Ibid., 9.