

Lent III 2017

“Be imitators of God, as beloved children, and walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” Ephesians 5.1

A couple of times a year it is good for us to try and look afresh at the ordering and decoration of our church: we get used to it and hardly notice it, and yet it tells us so much about the God who loves us and calls us to himself. The axis of the building itself, between font and altar is a good place to start: the two dominical sacraments that form the axis of the Christian life and journey. They are called dominical because they were instituted by the Lord himself. In baptism we emerge from the waters of our Christian birth, our beginning in Christ, named and blessed and beloved of God our Father. At the eucharist we are not only nourished with the spiritual food and drink that we need for the journey, but are also formed by Christ, formed as his people, when we gather at his table. He accomplishes new works in us, individually and corporately, when we gather together to break bread and drink from the common cup.

Then there are the saints-all around us.....as a reminder that we do not travel alone or only in this generation, but that we do so with the countless Christians of all times and all places. And then the decoration of the chancel arch and apse, as described in Isaiah, Daniel, Ezekiel and Revelation: reminding us that the worship we offer doesn't begin at 10.30am and end at 11.45am. Rather, when we gather here, we are joining in with the worship that is offered unceasingly before the Throne of Grace. And above all, Christ reigning in glory from the throne, with his right hand raised in blessing. And, if we look closely at his right hand, we can see that it has in it the wound of his crucifixion, the only man-made work in the Kingdom of Heaven.

The body of Christ-risen, ascended, glorified-bears in it the wounds of suffering love. The body of Christ here on earth, as we sometimes describe the Church, also bears in it the wounds of suffering love. In different places those wounds are felt differently: here, at this moment in time, in the Church of England they are felt particularly over the questions of gender and sexual identity which have been so much in the news in recent weeks. In particular these wounds have been felt in the discussions about the House of Bishops Report on Human Sexuality and on the nomination of Bishop Philip North as the next Bishop of Sheffield.

Some are arguing hard for removing that element, that group of people, which they understand to be keeping the wound from healing: who, in their right mind would do differently? If there is a cure then we surely seize it with both hands! However, today's Gospel makes it plain that there is risk associated with getting rid of the

unclean spirit: seven more evil spirits may enter and dwell there. And for us the problem is this: there is a serious and deep-seated lack of agreement over what it is that needs to be removed. Some would purge the church of those people and attitudes that are insufficiently progressive-they are after all “out of touch” with the modern world and thus keeping people from faith and harming the mission of the Church; others would purge the church of those who are too progressive, too closely aligned with the ways of the modern world: they have sold out on their Christian principles. This last Friday a priest friend I have known for thirty years resigned his orders, believing the C of E to have finally reached the point of no return. What a grave loss to the Church.

I wish I had an answer for you today. I wish I had an answer for me. Perhaps there will come a moment in these next months or years when the centre finally cannot hold and the fragile polity that is our beloved Church of England begins to come unravelling: there is talk of that happening already. I hope and pray not. Again today's Gospel sounds a warning: “a house divided against a house falleth”.

Last week Bishop Jonathan Goodall, Bishop of Ebbsfleet and Assistant Bishop in this diocese wrote a letter in response to the situation in Sheffield; his words could equally be applied to the House of Bishops Report:

“More not less work plainly needs to be done, more not less personal effort made, more not less trust given. I have every confidence in your faith in the Lord for the necessary gifts of grace and wisdom to continue as we have begun.”

Prophetic, Godly and challenging but encouraging words. It is not clear how there can ever be reconciliation between the rival claims that are tearing at the heart of the Church, tearing at God's heart, and yet.....and yet we have to go on with the task in hand: “*More not less work plainly needs to be done, more not less personal effort made, more not less trust given.*”

Of one thing I am certain: there are many worse ways to witness to an unbelieving world than that of patiently bearing our wounds together in the body of Christ. Put it another way: if there are wounds in the ascended and glorious body of our Saviour, why should we presume to live without them here on earth? If we cannot clearly see the whole path ahead from where we stand now, then let us concentrate on taking the next few steps as charitably and trustingly as possible and see what God has in store for us. As the experienced batsman said to his novice partner: “You and me are going to score a century between us today and were going to start with one run, and then we'll make it two. And then when we've got to ten, we'll add another ten...”
“Be imitators of God, as beloved children....”