

The Church: Admirers of Jesus or Members of Christ?

Sermon for the 12th Sunday after Pentecost, Year A, 23 August 2020

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT Australia

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Isaiah 51: 1-6; Psalm 138; Romans 12: 1-8; Matthew 16: 13-20

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

Last week Fr Martin reminded us as Anglicans of something that no Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox Christian would need reminding about: that the Blessed Virgin Mary is part of the picture for Christians, with an undeniable place in scripture as well as in unbroken Church tradition. To miss out on Mary is to miss out on a great gift from God. Today another mystery summons us in our readings that many Anglicans may not fully appreciate, and that mystery is the Church itself—and of our identity, too, of our purpose in life, emerging for us through our participation in the Church. But first a clarification: when I was a young parish priest in Brisbane I discovered to my horror that whenever I spoke of the Church in sermons people thought that I meant our congregation, and so let me be clear today that by Church I mean the One, Holy, Catholic and apostolic Church, as it's described in the Creed.

Let's begin with some theological questions about how we understand the Church, inspired by today's readings. Are we admirers of Jesus, or are we members of Christ—an image from St Paul that Bishop John Robinson liked to translate as 'membranes of Christ'? Is the Church an institution to which we relate, or a body of which we're a part? Is this a service that we attend, or don't attend, or is it a liturgy that we celebrate together? Is the Church based on a social contract entered into by like-minded Christians, or is the Church something that God calls into being through Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit, into which God summons us? In other words, do Christians make the Church, or does the Church make Christians? Which comes first, in a chicken and egg sort of way: the Christian or the Church?

Isaiah had no doubt about God's call constituting a new people, and giving an identity to its members: "look to the rock from which you were hewn and the quarry from which you were dug." He's talking to a lineage here, not just to individuals. The Psalmist, too, reminds us today that we belong to God, and that whatever dangers or troubles we face can't interfere with the fact that God has a purpose for us, which the Lord will bring to completion. This is wonderfully reassuring early in life when we might be looking for that purpose, or later in life when we might be questioning it: "The Lord will complete

his purpose for me: your loving-kindness, O Lord, endures for ever; do not forsake the work of your own hands.”

In our epistle today Paul doesn't present Christianity as an individual affair. Christianity isn't primarily about moral superiority, as my parents thought and so many nominal Christians like them. And it's not a self-help program, with optional churchgoing. It's not primarily about us and our morality and our spiritual needs being met. Instead Paul reminds us that we belong to God and mustn't forget to continually renew our self-offering to God, which is why we make that self-offering the last action in every Eucharist. Paul goes on to say that our life of belonging to God is at the same time a life of belonging to each other in the Church, with different roles that we enter more fully into the more faith we have. He mentions prophecy, teaching, exhorting, giving, leading and showing compassion. The Church is where we practice, exercise and come to be defined by these practices, these good habits; they make us more who we are the more we give ourselves over to them.

I know that this organic, mystical-sounding mutuality isn't how we Anglicans have typically been taught to think about the Church, and the more protestant our Anglican sensibilities, the more likely we are to think of Church as something secondary, optional, and even external to a Christian faith that's essentially private. Paul would turn

over in his grave at that thought, however. He insists today that we need our minds to be renewed so we can grasp the truth about our condition, and not think about ourselves and the Church in a worldly manner. For Paul, we're not take-it-or-leave-it consumers in a marketplace of spiritual resources. Instead we belong to Jesus Christ and hence to his people, bought and paid for.

And finally to our Gospel today. It's plainly set out there that Jesus is founding the Church, built on the rock of Peter's testimony about Jesus—or built on the leadership of Peter himself, and his successors, if you take the Roman Catholic line. Liberal Protestants like to make admiring noises about Jesus but are often less convinced about the Church, let alone anything Catholic. The great nineteenth-century Church historian Adolf von Harnack was one of them. He lamented that "Jesus announced the kingdom, and it is the Church that came."

But we mustn't separate Jesus from his Church, thinking we can honour him while dishonouring his bride and body. But neither can the Church betray the faith in Jesus that Peter confessed in today's Gospel. It's come to light in recent years that many in the Church have been doing just that, in appalling treatment of the young and vulnerable—the little ones so close to Christ's heart. But despite its many and plain faults we mustn't give up on the Church. Jesus declares in today's Gospel that the gates of hell won't prevail against

his Church. So all those sceptics and anti-Church critics who gleefully predict the Church's eventual disappearance are in for a surprise.

There are also many Christians who are deeply disappointed with the Church, and perhaps Jesus' reassurance today that the Church is his creation held safe forever in his hands might help them hang in there.

Friends, today we're invited to expand our minds about what we're part of in the Church, gathered here at its heart in the Eucharist, and hence we can take heart ourselves.

The Lord be with you ...