

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

***Finding our Way with St Philip***

St Philip and St James, Year C — 1 May 2022

The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell

*Isaiah 30: 18-21; Psalm 19: 1-6; 1 Corinthians 15: 1-8; John 14: 6-14*

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

The great twentieth-century German theologian Karl Barth once lamented that all we have to show for two thousand years of Christianity is a little monotheism, moralism and mysticism. That's certainly how it was in the nominally Anglican household where I grew up, though without the mysticism.

A lot of people with some sort of Christian connection, even more or less churchgoing, still blunder along with something like that level of faith, not sure what they really think about God and more or less perplexed about what to make of it all. Others today have confidently abandoned all that—for instance, there's a movement in the Catholic Church now of people formally renouncing their baptisms. Many like to call themselves spiritual but not religious, opting for one of several artisanal spiritualities that are out there in the marketplace, next to the artisanal bread and the artisanal olive oil. Instead, you and I are caught up in a different reality here in the Eucharist on St Philip's Day, when we look back with our patron to our shared inheritance in faith and reclaim our place in it once again.

You could describe the Old Testament as a long story about how God's beloved people find their way with God's guidance through difficult times, in the face of many tempting alternatives—a bit like the Church's situation today, really. In our Psalm this morning, God's people are reminded that their God is the true God, creator of the world, superior to the Sun and other astral deities, who run around at God's behest—a God to be trusted.

That trust is the theme of our Isaiah reading, as God's people under threat—and well aware that God can be hard to find—are reassured that God is there with them, guiding them in how they should go. They're promised nothing flash—just comfort, reassurance, and guidance when things get tough.

Our Gospel today takes up this theme once again, but this time the message is about who Jesus is from God, about Jesus as God with us, so that to know Jesus is to know God. Remember that lovely line from Archbishop Michael Ramsey that I've shared with you before: that "God is Christlike, and in him there is no un-Christlikeness at all." It's notable that Philip hadn't really caught on to this yet, with his plea to Jesus that he just show them the Father, to clear things up once for all. But Jesus' answer is that to see him is to see the Father; Jesus' answer is an invitation to a lifetime's journey in the company of others, and not the offer of once and for all illumination.

This journey that Jesus invites us on involves more than monotheism, and more than moralism—though it's a lot like mysticism. It's a journey together into the life and mind and heart of the God who wears the face of Jesus Christ. It's on that journey, and in time, that St Philip came to wear the face of God, too, as all the saints do—which is what makes them saints. But even the likes of me can come to bear a passing resemblance, if we let ourselves go and plunge into the Gospel. Which, again, is what we're doing here today, and every time we gather for the Eucharist.

When Jesus tells the disciples that whatever they ask for in his name will be done for them, it doesn't mean that Jesus is a magic charm, as may people have thought, past and present. I

remember visiting a lady in hospital, who was about to make her umpteenth IVF attempt. She said she'd called for me because she'd been told that if a priest prayed for her, she'd get a baby. I told her that I couldn't promise her that, but I could promise that if she opened her heart to God, she'd find strength and wisdom to deal with whatever the outcome, baby or no baby. This wasn't what she wanted to hear, and she's not alone in that. But Jesus only gives us one thing, really—only one thing—and that's himself. And with this gift of himself comes the offer of being uploaded into the life of God, which is the meaning of being Christian; it's the motive for thinking about God as Holy Spirit, and as Trinity; it's the chief message of scripture, and it's the work of our seven sacraments. Come what may in life, this is what prayer in Jesus' name means for us. In time, Christians can learn to pray for everything in light of this, and for nothing that's not in tune with it. That way, our prayers made in Jesus' name are most likely to be granted. So, praying "through Jesus Christ our Lord" isn't just a formula; it's an attitude, it's a lifestyle.

Finally, I want to mention one further crucial aspect that St Paul introduces in our second reading today. There he talks about the tradition of faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus that he hands on as an apostle, as part of that first generation of crucial saints and bishops-before-their-time who saw the risen Jesus alive in the Church, setting a new humanity on its way through history. Our man Philip finally caught up, and he was part of that, too, as we are today.

The tradition that St Paul hands on is an early version of the creed, and of course creeds like the one we'll say in a minute were crucial for the early Church in the face of much misunderstanding—of tempting easier alternatives that were doing the rounds. Hence all that "God from God, light from light, true God from true God" stuff, which was about staying true to our best spiritual instincts, and exalting Jesus as high as possible without compromising monotheism. Exactly as we saw it in today's Gospel, too.

Anyway, St Paul gives us this little creed-in-advance today. But he also gives us the apostolic ministry as an authoritative guardian and guide for the faith, listing himself as the last and least worthy of these apostles. Friends, this is why the Church appointed bishops as successors to the apostles and still does. Though in every age, from the Borgia popes to Trollope's Barchester bishops to today's CEO bishops with their MBA's, a reminder about the true nature of apostolic ministry is always timely. It's about inhabiting Christ as he inhabits God, and finding our bearings there, first as a Church and then as individuals.

Now don't get me wrong. This doesn't mean bowing down to the bishops, or to the priests, or to the theologians for that matter—God knows, that's no guarantee. But it does mean recognising that all these represent an essential, God given contribution to the mix of faith and discernment in our Church. We're in this together, collectively responsible members of an apostolic Church. And there have been times where it was the laity not the bishops who kept the Church on track, not least during the Arian controversy in the age of the creeds, as Cardinal John Henry Newman pointed out, with his subversive talk about consulting the laity in matters of doctrine.

So, friends, this is how we can do better than just blundering along in a bit of a daze when it comes to spiritual matters, let alone crafting our own artisanal spirituality in keeping with the commodity form. Instead, we're invited to know the one true God, who wears the beloved, trustworthy, human face of Jesus Christ. And thus we're invited to find our way, together with Philip our patron, in the adventure of an apostolic Church.

The Lord be with you . . .