

Third Sunday of Easter – 2017

We don't get much of a diet of Old Testament at this time of year and there's a good reason for that. The events of Holy Week dispersed the disciples and when they gathered they did so behind closed doors, fearful, confused, angry, grieving. Even the resurrection accounts describe them rather paradoxically as, filled with fear *and* great joy! So it crucial that we hear from the book of Acts, describing as it does the birth of the Church and importantly the transformation of this group, from frightened individuals to fearless advocates and apostles of the Jesus movement. Just look at that first reading this morning. How is this so? Well I put it down to a good diet!

Confession I am told is liberating, renewing, even exhilarating! Or perhaps embarrassing and painful! So let's get it done, over with. On the morning of ANZAC Day I was woken by two sounds, the first was my alarm clock the second, the drumming of rain on the flat roof of the bedroom... I turned over and went back to sleep! There! It doesn't feel very exhilarating!

Anyway I thought to assuage my conscience I should do something to honour those in whose footsteps I had, all be it tentatively, trod. Since coming to O'Connor, inherited a small library of books by G. A. Studdert-Kennedy M.A., M.C. Chaplain to HM the King. Not a well-known character these days but revered by those of his generation. Studdert-Kennedy was born in Leeds, Yorkshire in 1883 to a clergy family his father and grandfather were both Anglican clergyman. He was himself ordained and on the outbreak of the First World War he volunteered as a chaplain to the army on the Western Front, where he gained the nickname 'Woodbine Willie'. In 1917, he was awarded the Military Cross after running into no man's land to help the wounded during an attack on the German frontline. He wrote a number of books and poetry about his experiences, beginning with *Rough Rhymes of a Padre* (1918), and *More Rough Rhymes* (1919). A play was written about him called 'War! Lies! And a Packet of Fags! -the story of "Woodbine Willie".' A song was also written about his work: "Woodbine Willie couldn't rest until he'd/given every bloke a final smoke/before the killing,"

I sat that wet ANZAC Day with a book by Studdert-Kennedy called 'The Word and the Work.' Written in 1925, it was devised as a Lenten study on the prologue of John's gospel. On one hand it is a bit dated and yet on another remarkably fresh and contemporary. It was a great read, a real gem and although he didn't directly refer to his experiences on the western front they came through in his lack of sentimentality and the reality of life and death. It was good, earthy and yet profound stuff.

I am sure that we are all aware of the truism 'Actions speak louder than words.' Its first recorded use was by US President Abraham Lincoln. It is not a Biblical quote though the closest we come is perhaps in the Letter of James where we read: 'But be doers of the word, and not hearers only.' It was the mark of Studdert-Kennedy's ministry. I too was told in my early days of military chaplaincy 'if you say you're going to do something, do it!' Of course in the Christian tradition Jesus is the 'Word made flesh;' he is both word and

action and for us this lies at the heart of our sacramental life. Leo the Great wrote ‘what was visible in our Saviour has passed over into his sacraments’ and his near contemporary St Augustine liked to use the expression ‘visible words’ when speaking of the sacraments. I think that is worth thinking about because one of the great inheritances that we as Anglicans have received is a liturgical and pastoral balance between word and sacrament.

Over sixty years ago now, Karl Barth the great 20th century protestant theologian wrote: ‘What we know today as the church service in Roman Catholicism *and* in Protestantism is a torso. The Roman Catholic Church has a sacramental service without preaching. But I wish to speak at the moment not for or against her, but about our own Protestant Church. We have a service with a sermon but without sacraments. Both types of service are impossible.’ We as Anglicans have a balance between both types of service, between word and sacrament.

Participation is the key word. If you find it difficult to describe what ‘going to church’ is all about, you are not alone. To give a definition of liturgy is surprisingly difficult. Liturgy is a living thing, an action understood only through participation in it. We hear the words of scripture and our response is the reception of the sacrament which is spoken into being by the words of institution. This is my Body, this is my blood. What Thomas Cranmer, the architect of the Book of Common Prayer, wanted to emphasize was something that had been lost in the medieval church, the really exciting miracle that the communicants now become what they are eating - the Body of Christ!

Studdert-Kennedy opened his book *The word and the Work* by writing ‘There are no words that have ever been penned by the hand of mortal man which contain profounder wisdom than the opening verses of the Fourth Gospel – And the word became flesh. What the liturgy is endeavouring to achieve in Word and sacrament is for that Word to go on becoming flesh. Like the events described in this morning’s gospel passage: Your heart burning within you is the word catching fire within you, and then Christ is there in the breaking of the bread. The action in the breaking of the bread is the reality the word describes.

The disciples on the Emmaus Road, had had a tough week, dispirited, dejected. But they were energised by their experience...that very hour, it says, they returned to Jerusalem to fellowship. It must have been late, dark, they had after all encouraged Jesus to stay with them because evening was at hand. They had broken bread together and suddenly Jesus is no longer there; but of course he is. No wonder that the disciples returned to Jerusalem with great joy and haste they knew Jesus was with them. This was no passive reception, Word and sacrament energise, they engage the head and the heart. Some of us would prefer a rather cool, rational religion of the head and back away from the sacramental, fearing the emotion. But it is of course emotion, passion that will energise to do what we called to do. We may have had a tough week, but it is our participation in the liturgy that offers us the energy, the passion to go on. Word and sacrament and of course fellowship are the balanced diet we all need to nourish our spirits and become like those first disciples, advocates and apostles for the Jesus movement. Amen.