

Second Sunday of Easter – 2018

If you need to learn something in the army and there is little time you will be subjected to a 'Soldiers Five.' So here goes, this is a soldiers five on controversy in the early church! The leaders of the church in the first five centuries endeavoured to come to a consensus on the nature of Christ. Broadly speaking there were two competing camps one the 'Adoptionists' said that Christ was an ordinary, everyday person who had been adopted by God at his baptism. The others claimed that Christ was really a spirit-like figure, not fully human at all. They argued, but eventually at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 the Church decided that Christ was both fully human and fully divine. The argument goes on!

Many years ago, more than I care to remember I embarked on a ghost hunting exercise with my friends. We had newly acquired drivers' licences and cars and motorbikes, we were free! I spent a number of very cold and unfruitful nights in ruined abbeys, graveyards and other places we felt were likely to be haunted! Needless to say we saw or heard nothing, all we managed to do was to scare the living daylights out of each other! Ghosts have featured throughout human history, many great works of literature feature ghostly characters – Dickens and Shakespeare come to mind. I don't believe in Ghosts! I don't think I do anyway!

On Easter morning I had a crack at unravelling the mystery behind window that adorns our west end! I probably had limited success! But what I did say was that iconographically, under the watchful eye of the angel of the covenant (the rainbow bearer) the top figure in magenta, the creation/new creation themes of fire, water, air and earth are brought together. These are themes that are both earthy and spiritual; this is the Church, this is what we are all about. It is our core business to bring together and live this covenant of the earthy and the spiritual. The Church is both: the mystical body of Christ and the people of God. We are a sacramental church in that we seek the presence of God in the earthy - the bread and wine of the altar, the word proclaimed, in our gathering, in each other and those that we reach out to. This requires of us a fine balance; there are, I believe, churches who can tend too much either way, and they risk ceasing to be the Church that I believe the world needs.

This miracle of reconciliation the earthy and the spiritual, which is the Church, occurs profoundly as we share the peace. "Peace be with you," Christ said, "as the Father has sent me so I send you." It is this peace that we share. I have some sympathy with our Catholic brothers and sisters who have returned to the old ways in their rites with the response 'and with your spirit' because it speaks about that reconciliation. Every time we exchange the peace, we too unite heaven and earth, spirit and body and the risen Christ is present. In the Eucharist, we eat in order to grow together into the body of Christ - his risen body. We do not just receive spirit, nor are we cannibals - as the early Christians were dubbed.

We share the risen life of Christ which sees no division between spiritual and bodily realities.

But we don't think this way normally do we. Religious folk tend to think of themselves as bodies with spirits, what we call dualism. This thinking we have inherited from Plato and it has stuck! Someone once suggest that Thomas wasn't a twin at all but was called the twin because he thought much like many do he held to a sense of the division between body and spirit (you might recall that in Luke's gospel the disciples were terrified of Jesus because they believed him to be a ghost), and then he meets Jesus the perfect human who is not divided at all but is body and spirit reconciled. And in his exclamation revealed his restoration...my Lord and my God!

What we have presented before us this morning in our first two readings are these two elements, the earthy and spiritual it is our role, it is our very rationale, our mandate to reconcile the two. How do we do this? Is it important? What does mean in practical terms? Did that council in Chalcedon all those centuries ago merely engage in speculative theology or was there something practical about Christ as both human and divine?

During the week we received a complaint: A correspondent to the parish wrote, regarding the Palm Sunday Banner: *Now I know not to go to a church that pushes leftist politics. Your siding with a political force that has been trying to diminishing Christianity's influence in our culture for decades now and will continue to try and remove Christianity from our culture until it is replaced with the left's sacred beliefs of "diversity" and "multiculturalism". It bothers me greatly to see Christians buying into this.*

I was really quite surprised by this it never occurred to me that there might be some lefties among us!!! (that was joke)! I suggested to the correspondent that our political thinking of whatever stripe was borne out of our holding fast to Christian culture rather than diminishing it as he suggested. This holding fast to our faith compels us to hold together these competing ideas. The realities of our political life the way we live together – as was so boldly revealed to us in our first reading with Barnabas, and our lives of faith as proclaimed by John - what we have seen and touched and heard reveal glimpses of something greater. Our fellowship with each other, our politics, if you like is the fellowship with the Father and the Son that he has sent. You can't separate the two.

So those arguments at Chalcedon were crucial to the Christian faith. This thinking influences the way that we think about each other, our relationships both within the Church and with the wider world. It means that we cannot be self-centred individualists, but neither can we flee from the reality of being human and live with all its messiness. Like Thomas we will have doubts, but the peace that Jesus bequeaths to us is the peace that is found when heaven and earth are reconciled...our calling is to make this a reality for all. Amen.