

St Philips Anglican Church, O'Connor
Fourth Sunday of Easter — Year C — 8 May 2022

An Authentic Easter Church

Reverend Martin Johnson

Acts 9:36-43, Psalm 23, Revelation 7:9-17, John 10:22-30

For the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd. Words from today's reading from the Book of Revelation. Words which should highlight the issue for us of the identity of Jesus and of our identity and a reminder that Jesus defies those who want to define him. The General Synod of our Church sits this week for the first time since the pandemic was visited upon us. It is a meeting that is of great significance for our Church and as such it is crucial that we commit ourselves to pray for the members of the synod in their deliberations. Much is at stake, some commentators believing that the very unity of our part of the Anglican Communion is in peril. I read a while ago that Dr Rowan Williams was no longer speaking in terms of 'Communion' but 'family.' And as we all know you can't choose your family!

Perhaps this is a starting point for our prayers and deliberations, because as much as frustration and indignation might be in our thinking from time to time, we are linked as family to this Church, no matter what. We can choose to distance ourselves, but we must ask, is this of God? I would suggest it is not; I would suggest that our call is to draw ever closer, because our faith and our tradition demands it of us.

Jesus never distances himself from those around him. He does retreat when he needs to, but he never isolates himself from those who disagree with him. In fact he draws ever closer. Despite Jesus' dispute with the religious authorities, rather than form his own band or sect or live out in the wilderness with the Essenes, he engages even more closely with the faith of his people. The gospels describe Jesus as an observant, orthodox Jewish male, visiting Jerusalem for the festivals – as he does in today's passage, going to the synagogue - as was his custom, teaching in the Temple, gathering people around him, reinterpreting their faith, he certainly challenges the elite, challenges those who make of the faith a legal or political matter, but he stands firm on the very foundation of the Jewish identity, I haven't come to abolish the law, he says, but to fulfill it.

As many of you know during my preparation for ordination I spent time at the College of Resurrection in Mirfield, Yorkshire. It was while I was there that I became aware of one of members of Community, a priest called Harry Williams. Williams had been an academic theologian, he was the Dean of Trinity College, Cambridge while Prince Charles studied there; indeed Williams composed and read one of the prayers used in the wedding of Charles and Diana.

I have been thinking about Williams and his writing this week as I have prayed for the work of the synod. In the mid 60's Williams endured a crisis in his faith and place in the Church. It was a crisis born out of his sexuality and he would suffer a complete mental breakdown, it was during this time he wrote a book called *True Wilderness*. A few years he turned his back on his academic career and was admitted to the Community of the Resurrection, he subsequently wrote *True Resurrection* – a book I read while I was with the Community. Later still he wrote *Tensions: Necessary Conflicts in Life and Love*. Today as we contemplate the issues facing the Church, William's thinking seems fresh, contemporary. Williams was one of those rare creatures profoundly orthodox without being conservative.

Necessary conflicts - I wonder if there is a truth in this today. Williams made the claim that we refuse life by trying to avoid the conflicts that it inevitably involves. By avoiding conflict,

he writes, we are not being authentically ourselves.

Williams wrote this:

This is a theme found frequently in the Old Testament: Yahweh will fight against his own people because they are not being authentically themselves—"But they rebelled and vexed his holy Spirit; therefore he was turned to be their enemy and fought against them." Just as physical pain is a warning that all is not well with us and something needs to be done, so neurosis is a similar warning. It is a call to repentance—not to repentance in its all too familiar garb of moralism and religiosity, but to real repentance: a fundamental change in our whole outlook and attitude, a radical reorientation of our lives, a new beginning which is like being born again.

I would claim that Jesus was the most authentic person who ever lived. This is where his authority came from, this is what made him totally irresistible, then and now; in today's passage we heard 'How long will you keep us in suspense? A better translation might be 'how much longer will you go on annoying us?' The authentic Jesus is born out of his conflict with the authorities. His was a call for them to be authentic. His was a call to repentance—*not to repentance in its all too familiar garb of moralism and religiosity, but to real repentance: a fundamental change in our whole outlook and attitude, a radical reorientation of our lives, a new beginning which is like being born again.*

This call of Jesus, is the meaning of Easter faith. This, Williams describes as 'true resurrection' following his time in the wilderness as he wrestled with his authentic self and his place in the Church. True resurrection, the sense of being authentically himself, born again, but born again out of necessary conflict.

Today's message from Acts is one of rebirth, the vision of Revelation speaks of what that rebirth looks like; at the centre of it is a lamb, this is the authentic identity of Jesus, revealed to us out of the conflict of self-giving and cross.

Our calling is to authenticity, our identity is bound up with that of the resurrected Christ, it is clearly more than simple biology or ethics and this means that we exercise our leadership with humility, as both shepherds and lambs. We are Christians in the Anglican tradition, this too is our identity and we hold fast to classic Anglican polity: the authority of scripture, reason and the voice of the living Church. This is the family we are part of. But we are also individuals made in God's image, our striving is to live as such; authentic to who we really are, new people; repentant, constantly striving to be to be remade, born again.

I pray that the Synod meeting in this Easter season will seek a renewed vision for our Church. There will be conflict, yes. But perhaps this is necessary, that we might be authentically the Easter Church we are called to be. Amen.