

Anglican-Lutheran Society Conference

24th-28th August 2018

Sermon at the Final Eucharist

Preacher : Fr Phillip Swingler (our Roman Catholic Observer)

Readings: 1 Kings 8; John 6

On Sunday in the Cathedral we recited together 'We believe in One God, the Father, the Almighty, and Maker of Heaven and Earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.'

In a curious way I have noticed, as we have gone through our conference sessions, how relevant some of the verses of our readings this morning are to many of the things we have and experienced. I am not going to pick on too many of them because you can work them out for yourselves. But our conference has contemplated the vital human question, 'Where is God? Where is Christ alive? And how do we find him today?'

It's the perennial human question, of course, and was at the heart of the great divide in Christianity that was the rupture, now healing but as yet unhealed, at the time of the Protestant Reformation. 'Where is God to be found today? And what is he really like?'

But I sense that this question is based on a deeper and more profound concern as to the reality of Christ's presence in the world, in the processes of creation and redemption. That formed part of our theme in the early part and in the latter part of our talks: Christ to be found in perhaps surprising situations for many Christian believers. How different Christian thinkers and reformers have understood this – or misunderstood it – and interpreted it – or reinterpreted it – these acts of God – creation and redemption which really and truly are a unity is what I believe is the cause underlying the division of the Church – not only the Protestant Reformation but other ones. They are really concerned with what I call a 'catholic' (with a small 'C') wholeness of God's purposes for this world and for humanity.

So many of our divisions and separations have developed from the failure to hold creation and redemption in a dynamic living and loving tension, in our ways of being humans in a created and recreated world. For the prophet Elijah, we heard, the word was not in the earthquake, not in the big things, not in the dramatic wind, fire – but in the sound of the gentle, refreshing breeze. And it was in that that he found the message of God. He was seeking justice and righteousness and he now knew that this came only from focusing on God and then putting that into action.

The gentle breeze of the normal world of matter infused by the Spirit of the creative and redeeming God is one of the things we have been taught this week. William Temple, the Archbishop of Canterbury during the Second World War, describes the whole world of God's creation as consisting of different levels of which we can discern, he says, those we call matter, life, mind and spirit. And each of these, he says, presupposes the levels lower than itself and each finds its own fulfilment or actualisation in being only when it is possessed and indwelt by the level above it. So, like his Roman Catholic contemporary the Jesuit priest Theillard de Chardin, Temple claims that we can only believe in the supremacy of the divine spirit if we also believe in the reality of the matter which it informs, whether that is the world of nature or the world of human lives. He insists that this is sound and

comprehensible Christian philosophy and he observed famously, as I am sure you will all remember, that Christianity is the most materialistic of all religions.

We know that Christianity is fundamentally materialistic, yet we often imagine that it is something spiritual, and over the centuries spiritualisation has repeatedly obscured how physical, how mucky, Christianity really is in its dealings with its own members and its dealings with others, good or bad – the dealings, not the people! But the truth keeps resurfacing and that's part of the job of reformers. It is of course, we all know, the incarnation that drives this for as Christians we claim that we have heard what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands concerning the word of life, we testify to it, we've seen it.

Yes, touched, physically touched, like St Helena, mother of the Emperor Constantine, when she made her famous pilgrimage to the Holy Land. She took a load of soil back to Rome to spread on the floor of her private chapel so that she could pray on the ground on which she thought the feet of the Saviour had once trod. You can't get much more crude or basic than that.

It reminds me a bit about our discussions about relics in the Catholic Church. I once had an argument with Dr Long [a member of the Society's Executive Committee] about going on a pilgrimage to Luther sites and he said, 'Luther wouldn't like that – we're not going to do that!' But I said, 'What about Paul's handkerchief in the New Testament which was a relic, and the shadow of Peter when people moved into it so that they would be healed by it?' So I told him that there was a great English Catholic named Edmund Arrowsmith who was martyred just after English Reformation times and Catholics had a great devotion to this man. Two different churches in the north of England had relics of his hands that had been cut off when he was hanged, drawn and quartered. One church had one hand and one had another and they decided on a great anniversary to bring them together for the great Mass, and when they put them out to be venerated they discovered there were two left hands! Well, they kept their devotion to Edmund Arrowsmith and God's work in him but they didn't bring the relics out much more!

Anyhow, the idea that matter is sacred was alien to much religious philosophy in the ancient world. The soul was prized over the body and the so-called Gnostic, or knowing, sect proclaimed redemption from this material world away from the corruption of spiritual, the crudeness and grossness of matter, and away from rationality by coarse emotions and in the way of the famous saying, 'We get pie in the sky when we die' – that's the all-important thing. That's a terrible, terrible error in incarnational Christianity, yet many Christians are profoundly affected it still, yet Orthodox Christianity would affirm that the utterly transcendent God, which he is, containing all things and yet not contained, was not ashamed to get the divine hands dirty creating the material world, which meant that what was created was not dirty at all, but sacred – every bit of it, every human being. We've heard this again and again during our time together. The creation was declared good by God the creator, and the hands that made it were God's – God's own Word, and God's own Spirit.

I was particularly moved by an example of that yesterday when we heard the young people from different religious and non-religious backgrounds talking about how they were really concerned to welcome people as if they were welcoming Christ. Not for nothing are the words in many Eucharistic Prayers, when the elements of bread and wine are taken to the table are described as the fruits of the earth offered in thanksgiving to the creator of all and the redeemer of all. The ordinary stuff of the earth, bread and wine, you and me, are sacred, as are all those who populate this earth.

Not so long ago I read a book by a Methodist theologian, Frances Young, who describes this in a very vivid way. 'It is in seeing the glorious autumn colours, hearing the physical sounds of music,

touching the hand of the one we love, smelling the scent of flowers and tasting the bread of life that we have tactile contact with the hidden presence of the divine. And we find that presence above all,' she says, 'in providing concrete material assistance to those who are in need, in everyday caring for our Lazaruses, giving and receiving from them physical signs of our mutual regard. Someone suffering from a degenerative disease said to me I need to be loved by somebody with skin on.'

So ordinary material things and people constitute precisely what is holy and redeemed. The seventeenth century Anglican metaphysical poet and cleric Thomas Traherne speaks of the image of God in all humanity as well as the image of God in all creation, and of the way the creating Spirit of God is what draws us to nature in reverence and wonder. Even Mr Dawkins has a reverence and wonder about creation. He uses the word 'creation' symbolically, of course, not believing in a creator, but even in him there is still that vestige of the true human response to what is wonderful in God's creation. And, of course, it's what draws us to one another, because it's the same Spirit who unites us, and all that we hold in common, together.

God, as we all know from our personal lives, is profoundly present to all who live in love and mercy. There can be no separation between the life of the Trinity active in creation and redemption and the life of all God's creation, all that he seeks to draw back into wholeness with his God-self. Jesus, both divine and human, brings the life of heaven and the life of earth together, and belief in his life and purpose, God's emissary to a world resisting union with the creator is in fact transformative in our conflict-ridden, selfish environment. Every man, woman or child being the object of our Saviour's love, is to be treated, as we have heard, as we would treat our Saviour himself. For the love of Christ is to dwell within each person. This is God's purpose. For everyone is the object and purpose of God's love.

With the privilege of sharing in the humanity of Christ, Christians come to share too in his divinity, witness in this kind of living, as Traherne says, 'As the fullness of the Godhead dwelleth in our Saviour, so it shall dwell in us.' When we act towards others with generosity and grace it is as though Christ were ministering to Christ, a moving picture of the essential unity between all living things.

In a sermon entitled "The Weight of Glory" preached in the 1940s C S Lewis proclaims that next to the Blessed Sacrament on the altar your neighbour is the holiest object presented to your senses, sharing and receiving gifts from others as from God, supremely and sublimely his real presence.

Similarly, the Roman Catholic theologian, Olympe Philipe Gerbet in his interesting book, "Considerations on the Eucharist viewed as the generative dogma of Catholic Piety", written in 1840, describes the Eucharist as "the union with God raised to the highest degree that can be attained within the limits of the present order, and beyond this is heaven".

The presence of the eternal life of God, itself in a sense beyond all human capacity for definition or comprehension, is made real and touchable for believers through the material world of the sacraments. And this is expressed particularly as here and now in our last morning, in a concrete church community of real persons living in their real bodies with all that brings in this liturgy. For the Eucharistic Thanksgiving is nothing less than the great Doxology, the great Thanksgiving for our created and creative physical existence, its redemption in Christ and its restoration at the resurrection. Through this sacrament we are truly in touch with the incarnate Christ.

So, where is Christ alive today? Dr Martin Luther famously argued for Christ's ubiquity, and that the scriptural and creedal claim that the risen, ascended Christ "sits at the right hand of God" describes not a literal, confining presence as if he is stuck miles away on a glorious throne, but it describes the

quality and state of being everywhere, or in an infinite number of places at the same time, and in an infinite number of people at the same time, the all-presence of his creative and justifying presence. There it is – the promise and assurance of reconciliation with God and so also with all creation, and the first taste of that righteousness and justice which the prophet Elijah was given and found in ordinary life.

God, of course, cannot be reduced to time, place and human measure, and he humbles and explodes all our human categories of thought because the divine is infinite, invisible, immortal and incomprehensible, beyond speech or thought, beyond human language or music or conception. And saving knowledge is only possible because God has accommodated his divine self to the human level in the self-emptying of Christ on the cross, crucified for you and me to reconcile us to his world and to God.

Well, Luther sees God as essentially or substantially present everywhere and in every creature, as he puts it, “Even in the tiniest leaf, for the hand of the creator is still present in the creation and yet mysteriously God is also nowhere, above and apart from all creatures. God is free and unbound.” Luther says, “See the bright rays of the sun are so near to you that they pierce into your eyes or your skin, so that you feel them, yet you are unable to grasp them and put them into a box, even if you should try for ever. So too,” he says, “with Christ, although he is everywhere, does not permit himself to be so caught and grasped and controlled.”

What makes the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper different from everything else is that it is accompanied by the spoken word of the creative and redeeming God. For through the word Christ binds himself to us as he promises, and he binds himself to the outward forms of bread and wine in a real presence which transforms us, saying to us, ‘Here you are to find me!’, as he says to other people.

Here and now this morning God allows himself to be known personally as the bread is broken for you, so God arranges that the mouth eats physically for the heart, and the heart eats spiritually for the mouth, and thus both are satisfied and saved by one and the same food, as Dr Luther says.

So, where is he today? Well, the reading we had in the cathedral on Sunday said, ‘My flesh, says Jesus, is real food; my blood is real drink; whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in them.’ And it’s not just for ourselves but for others. And we prayed, ‘Blessed be God by whose grace creation is renewed, by whose love heaven is opened, and by whose mercy we offer our sacrifice of praise. Thanks be to God.’