

Homily for (3A)

“The people that walked in darkness has seen a great light; On those who live in a land of deep shadow, a light has shone.”

✠ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This quote, in today’s Gospel, from the prophecy of Isaiah, “the people that walked in darkness’, refers, in its original location in the Old Testament, to the future liberation of the people of the Northern tribes from Assyrian oppression through the exercise of the mighty power of the Lord God. Matthew has picked it up to portray Jesus’ move to Capernaum, up north in Galilee, as the fulfilment of that promise. He expresses it in the words:

“From that moment Jesus began his preaching with the message, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is close at hand.’”

The proclamation of the near arrival of God’s kingdom is the central message of Jesus, and, along with the resurrection, is the basis and object of Christian hope. It represents the future, final salvation of all humanity socially, politically, and spiritually, through an exercise of the sovereignty of God, establishing justice and peace on earth as well as in heaven. This passage truly expresses the essence of the Christ event.

This is heady and inspiring stuff and the contrast with the passage from 1 Corinthians, which we have also heard this morning is all the more stark. Alas, once again, Christians are falling out.

“I do appeal to you, brothers, for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ, to make up the differences between you, and instead of disagreeing among yourselves, to be united again in your belief and practice.”

Does this sound familiar? Christians often fall out, and, it doesn’t just happen in the Church of England, although we do seem to be particularly good at it. Sadly, the history of the Church through the ages bears witness to a constant tradition of bickering and worse.

I am for Paul. I am for Apollos. I am for Cephas. I am for Christ.

I am for Arius, I am for Athanasius.

I am for Pelagius, I am for Augustine.

I am for Rome, I am for Constantinople and so on.

Now, Christians are deep believers and deep thinkers, but they sometimes mistake a personal agenda for the demands of their faith. Do you remember that wonderful Fr Ted episode where Fr Ted is goaded by a colleague to undertake a real Lenten programme and makes the mistake of asking for help from a religious order. They send Sr Assumpta. After a night on a bed with only bricks as a mattress, Ted and Dougal are woken in the middle of night to attend their breakfast, which is only water...

Father Ted: Sister Assumpta, you know we really are only up for the basic booze, fags and rollerblading deal. I mean, the getting up early thing is great but- This is water.

Sister Assumpta: That's right.

Father Ted:Alright, alright, having a bit of a laugh with the big thickos from the island. Where's our real breakfast?

Father Dougal: Ted, I'd love a pop-tart.

Father Ted: Yes, Father Dougal likes his pop tarts first thing in the morning.

Sister Assumpta: I really don't think *pop tarts* have any place in our Lord's plan for the world.

Father Ted: I think they have as much a place as anything else. Maybe our Lord doesn't take a personal interest in them but I'm sure He delegates them to someone almost as important.

(Father Dougal: What about....Frosties?

Father Ted: Again, same thing: He might not have come up with the idea but He'd be the one who'd give them the green light.

Father Dougal: Oh right. But if you take something like, say, Sugar Puffs, now or Lucky Charms-

Sister Assumpta: FATHERS, COULD YOU PLEASE- Could you please stop having that conversation, finish your breakfast and come outside for your daily punishment.)

Well, Christians can lose the point of our faith. The Church has always been full of big personalities, and sometimes those personalities have not got on with each other, beginning with Peter and Paul. Other big personalities have thought that their insight was more important than the unity and witness of the Church: Martin Luther, for all the deep respect we owe him, was one of those, as were the Popes who were contemporary with him. This week, in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, we remind ourselves that in order to build the visible unity of the Church we need to remain steadfast in our primary loyalty – not to an idea, or to our place in the church, but to Christ himself.

We have to remember that we are not long out of the caves, 200,000 years or so, and that we can regress pretty quickly. Richard Wagner once said that it didn't matter that we are descended from the monkeys, provided that we don't go back there. We all have some pretty unpleasant atavistic instincts which our faith, and the indwelling of our Lord Jesus Christ should help us with. What is required of us is to surrender our whole humanity to our faith - heart, soul and mind, so that when one of them goes astray, the other elements of ourselves are there to steer us back to what is true, good, beautiful and holy, back to the light of Christ, back to what makes the Church work for the Kingdom.

The Rule of St Benedict, as ever, hits the nail on the head – In Chapter 72 of his Rule he speaks of the Good Zeal which monks should have. He says this:

This zeal... the monks should practise with the most fervent love. They should anticipate one another in honour; most patiently endure one another's infirmities, whether of body or of character; they should vie with one another in obedience, no one following what he considers useful for himself, but rather what benefits another. They should practise a fraternal charity with a chaste love. They should fear God in love; love their Abbot with a sincere and humble charity; prefer nothing whatever to Christ. And may he bring us all together to life everlasting!

Prefer nothing whatever to Christ. That's the beginning, middle and end of our Christian story. Something to remember in this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.