

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 12/Trinity 3 Year A 2023

One of the tasks for faithful Christians is to constantly re-clarify and reassert the person and work of Jesus Christ. As faithful Christian, we confess that Jesus is the Son of God; that he is the eternal Word, co-equal and co-eternal with the Father and the Holy Spirit; that at a particular time and in a particular place he was incarnate of the Virgin Mary; that he was a real historic figure; that he had a short public ministry; that he was crucified and was raised to life; and that he returned to eternal glory in heaven. Now, much of all this we have just affirmed in our Creed. And it is good we do that each week because these assertions are constantly under attack.

This past week, it was made known that the first transgender clergyperson had been made archdeacon in the Diocese of Manchester. The elevation to such a position of authority in the church is scandal enough. And can only leave us, and most other faithful Anglicans, just rolling their eyes in disbelief at the Church of England and the nonsense that goes on there. But even more scandalous than the appointment of this man masquerading as a woman is the heretical theology he espouses.

The Rev. Rachel Mann in a prayer called, 'A Prayer of Approach' has written: *Holy God, chuckling wise woman, tender and strange we bless you. Trouble us, bewitch us into delight in your love, mercy and grace. Christ our sister, unite us in your holy bleeding, as you took spit and dust for healing... Birth-Spirit, as you coursed in intimacy through the veins of Eve and Adam, Hagar and Abraham... be the pulse of our lives.* I won't go on, but it does. Give me the soundness of the BCP any day!

Much of the trouble here is that there is enough to make it sound familiar and religious. But cloak anything with pious language and almost any progressive cause can sound credible. Speak of love, mercy, and grace and hopefully we'll overlook God being called a woman who bewitches us, or that Christ is referred to as 'sister.' As C.S. Lewis said, once we start addressing God as mother, we have embarked on a new religion. And that is certainly what we have here.

This is a sickening perversion of the truth of the faith. But must not surprise us. If someone can so willfully dismiss the God-given order of creation, then they will also willfully dismiss God's own self-revelation. While oftentimes the motive for such expressions of faith is said to make the church more welcoming, tolerant, and inclusive, our faith is also an invitation to repentance, conversion and change.

Ultimately, it is a false evangelism because it is a false faith. It is no longer Christian. We end up with the strange situation of an Anglican archdeacon proclaiming a neo-pagan religion. It is not unknown in the church, but wolves in sheep's clothing must be called out when we see them.

This is just one example from one cleric - though there are numerous others - of radical departures from the faith being normalised. So often what is common in these perversions of the faith is that rather than Christ and what he has bestowed to his church setting the standard for belief and practice, it is the world. Saint Paul famously argued against conformity with this world. Believers are to be *in the world but not of it*. The warning at the end of the gospel portion today should ring loud and clear. And it should instill a holy fear into the hearts of all those who advocate for departures from the faith we have received: *the one who disowns me in the presence of men, I will disown in the presence of my father*.

At the heart of so much revisionism is a stubborn refusal to humbly submit to the faith once delivered. It is only human pride – pride, *the origin of all sin* – that gives rise to these things. Pride, which *displaces God*, and instead places man at the centre. And that is precisely what is going on with so many attempts to ‘update’ the faith of the church. Human values, human standards, and human agendas are imposed on the gospel. But the gospel will not permit this!

Now, we hear a lot about identity today. Identity politics. My identity is what matters. You cannot challenge my identity, and all the rest. Christian faith disarms this entirely. Because Christian identity does not turn inward to the self (again, that primary sin of pride). Christian identity is turned to Another, namely Christ! Our identity is Christ! That is why we are named ‘Christian’. That is why we mark ourselves with the sign of the cross. That is the sign and symbol, the mark of our identity. This is why we are anointed with holy chrism at baptism, the oil named after Christ himself! We are incorporated into his own body so that Christ’s identity becomes our identity.

In the epistle reading today to the Romans, Saint Paul highlights what is at stake in our identity. If our identity is on the self – expressed here as ‘Adam’ – then that only leads to death. Adam’s pride leads to death. It is only by identifying with Christ that this is overcome, by receiving what Paul terms ‘*the free gift in the grace of the one man Jesus Christ*. The *free gift is not like the trespass*’, Paul argues. Because even as all

humanity is weighed down by the burden of Adam's sin, in Christ (and some translations helpfully pick this up) the gift *outweighs* the fall. In other words, whatever havoc wreaked by Adam, whatever the cost of pride, whatever the damage caused by sin, what *Christ* has achieved by his saving death and resurrection more than compensates! And it is not a mere reversal of fortunes. It is not simply a restoration. Paul's point here is that we gain something *even more wonderful*.

Which simply goes to highlight what a fool's errand it is to pin our colours to something other than Christ! Choosing the path of accommodation only defies the free gift Christ offers. Choosing the path of least resistance does not forge a brave new way forward, but instead has us circle back to the weight and miserable burden of the self! Yes, identifying with Christ gives us true freedom and life. But *there is* a cost to identifying with him. Because either Christ is Lord and God of our lives, or we are. The New Testament will describe this cost in several ways. Saint Paul says that we, *share in Christ's death so to share in his resurrection*. In the gospels there is the idea that we are to, *deny ourselves and carry our cross*. And in the gospel today, *do not be afraid of those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul*. The implication being there will be those who seek to kill the body! Precisely because (we hear a few verses before this), *you will be hated by all because of my name*. Identifying with Christ is costly.

Now, the church has always been wary of those who actively seek martyrdom. Which is why we must pray for prudence, for wisdom, for discernment in how we live out our faith boldly and confidently. But also sensibly! And we must find compelling ways to communicate the gospel in an ever-changing world. The guiding principle in this, perhaps, is that to bear the name of Christ, to identify with him, will include being united with his Cross. The trouble with so many revisionist agendas in the church, the trouble with so many attempts to be winsome and attractive, is that they take us away from the Cross, and so away from Christ.

But to this, take to heart the words of Our Lord in the Gospel today. Three times in the gospel text today Christ says, *fear not!* Have no fear because God is on our side. Have no fear because Christ has already won the victory. And because we identify with Christ - we are his own - the victory is ours! What a powerful message we need to hear! A message that can fill our hearts with hope and confidence! A message to assure us that whatever the world offers us is but an impoverished alternative to the wonder and glory that is revealed in Christ Jesus. Amen.