

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 26/Trinity XVII Year A 2023

You may remember from the dim, dark days of 2003 the release of the novel, 'The Da Vinci Code' by Dan Brown. It became an international bestseller. In 2006 it was made into a film starring Tom Hanks. I read the book at the time, and in fact enjoyed it. (But looking for it this past week it was clear I must have tossed it out between then and now). Part of the book's appeal was that it managed to combine history, art, and religion all within a conspiracy-theory crime thriller. It proved immensely attractive. But reading Dan Brown for theology and history sort of became like reading James Bond for marriage advice or Harry Potter for science. The trouble was that many of the novelistic and fictitious assertions on history, art and religion were in fact just that: fictitious. However, the author claimed both before the title page and in numerous interviews, that historical information in the book was in fact accurate and well-researched. And many people took this at face value. The areas touched on by religion at the time elicited much response, and many sermons were preached on it at the time. Because many faithful believers were rattled at their faith being challenged in the popular culture. And many people in the surrounding culture felt emboldened to say, *See, you stupid Christians! You believe all this religious clap trap about Jesus. But look! The historian Dan Brown has uncovered how false it all is!*

The novel asserted that the conspiratorial coverups of the church included such things as Mary Magdalene being married to Jesus. That the Holy Grail was not the cup Christ used at the Last Supper, nor even the vessel of medieval Arthurian legends. It was in fact the blood line of Jesus and Mary Madgalene, and that their descendants settled in southern France to become part of the Merovingian Dynasty. And that the gnostic gospels such as that of Thomas and Philip and Peter and indeed Mary Magdalene were a more authentic witness to the life of Jesus, but were suppressed by the church because it didn't like their message. But this claim ignored the fact that even when these books were circulating in the early church they were recognized as later interpolations, had no apostolic authority, and were rejected on that basis.

Many of Dan Brown's assertions now seem quaint, have been dismissed as nonsense, and happily forgotten. So, why then, revisit ghosts of bad novels past? Because one Brown's assertions – one not unique to him, but one he certainly amplified - was around the person of Christ. In the novel it was argued that the church at Nicaea in 325 consolidated its power by elevating the 'mortal prophet' Jesus into a 'divine being'.

It is this idea in particular which has proved rather resilient. Again, not unique to Brown. It has been regurgitated in one way or another through the centuries. And not infrequently a book will be published along these lines. It's the idea that has given rise to various heretical groups and various academics and church leaders who think they knew better than the bible or the apostolic faith. The essential argument of them all is that the original pure gospel was of a Jesus who went about doing good, suffered an ignominious death at the hands of his opponents, but who imparted a new ethical way of being. And when Constantine made Christianity the 'official state religion' well, that corrupted everything, including Jesus' elevation to the status of God.

These assertions fail on two key fronts. Firstly, they fail to understand what the ecumenical councils of the church (such as at Nicaea) were for: to *clarify and explain* the received faith. They never sought to innovate or depart from the received faith. What may have been implicit in the Scriptures and the apostolic tradition was made explicit by the rulings of the councils. Secondly, they overlook the witness of the principal sources, namely the scriptures themselves. At Nicaea, the church was not imposing a divine status on Christ. The council was simply articulating *the relationship* of the Son with the Father. And so, if we turn to the principal record on both the life of Jesus and the earliest reflections about him – that is the New Testament – then the evidence is clear. What the church says about Jesus comes from the Bible.

When orthodox Christian faith is challenged, it would be fair to say, we do not always know how to respond. If we did, then we would allow something like Dan's Brown novel to simply be left as entertainment. There would not be such ripe ground for the emergence of cults and sub-Christian sects. And we would have the courage to say to elite liberal churchmen, 'shut up and depart'. So, from time to time, then, it is important to remind ourselves of the record of scripture, and why the church can make such bold claims about Jesus. Because *we ought* to have confidence in the record of scripture. We should have confidence that the way the church has read and interpreted them is trustworthy and true. And that anything which departs from the chief witness of the scriptures can be dismissed as speculation and fabrication.

A key text in the bold assertions the church makes for Jesus is seen in today's epistle portion. It is a key text, but certainly not the only text. They are numerous, and many parts are put together to make the whole picture. But the sublime and exultant portion placed before us today is so clear and unambiguous about Christ's divine status.

Part of its significance and importance is that it is so early! Paul's letter to the Philippians was written about the mid-50s to the early-60s of the First Century. That makes it at least a decade before the earliest gospels were written. Now, in this part of the letter, the apostle is making an argument for unity, harmony, and solidarity. But he makes his argument of what the church should be based on who Christ is understood to be. This is reflected in the second half of our reading today which is widely understood to be a hymn or some sort of poetic prose. *Though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.* And so on. Most scholars agree that this hymn-like portion is something Paul has picked up from elsewhere. That is, it *precedes* Paul and is earlier than the letter itself. It leaves us in no doubt that the earliest witnesses, the earliest records, did not shy at all away from the status of Christ's divinity; that his saving work was the very centre of the cosmos, and that he is Lord of all. So much for a later corruption of the Constantinian Church!

This hymn-like portion is carefully shaped in a V-like structure: the descent of Christ from above, to the ascent of Christ from below. Importantly, this text shows us what I have described before as the 'whole Christ'. We have presented for us his Incarnation, described here as a self-emptying of divine glory to take on human form. We also have described his death which becomes the pivot, the hinge point of the poem. And in fact, the pivot and hinge-point of history and of all theology. *He became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.* Christ's death gives way, then, to his exaltation, taken here as a single act of resurrection, ascension and glorification. A glorification dependent on his obedience to death: *Therefore God also highly exalted him.* An exaltation which centres not only on his Name being above all names, but this entire movement from descent, death, and exaltation directs us to one inevitable acclamation: *Jesus is Lord.* His entire saving work bears witness this. And so, we his disciples bear witness to this. In this one, early text so many of the ideas that would later be confirmed and clarified in the creeds find expression. Of Christ's preexistence, of his true humanity, of his death, resurrection and glorification, and of the whole universe declaring him Lord, *In heaven, on earth and under the earth.* We need not be unnerved or unsettled by what detractors say about our faith. We can trust the New Testament. We can say what we say about Jesus because it comes from those who knew him and knew his impact on their lives. But for us too. When we know the truth of Jesus Christ, then we too will truly know him to be the exultant Lord of all. Amen.