

Homily for Trinity XI - 2019

“You have come to Mount Zion and the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven and to a judge who is God of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect and to Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks more graciously than the blood of Abel.”

These two wonderfully vivid and inspiring verses from the 12th chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews give us an incredibly rich image of the worship of the Apostolic church – as a Eucharistic church, and as a Sacramental church, that goes right back in the time of the apostles themselves and to the first generations of Christians who followed them.

It has always been popular, especially in the pictorial bibles that have been served up to young children throughout my life, to present the early Christians of the apostolic and sub-apostolic times as simple ‘bible believing people’ living rather austere lives and having no churches, no ceremonies, no sacraments even and certainly no emphasis on maintaining tradition but who exemplified by their evangelical lives the beauty of a very simple faith. Its mostly pie in the sky and such an image is at odds with the picture of the apostolic church that emerges from the Epistles and the Acts of the Apostles and the picture of the sub-apostolic church of the second and third centuries AD.

There is a fairly simple reason why the image most of us have of the earliest days of Christianity is so ‘cute’ but so unrealistic. It is because the great majority of such literature placed before us when we were children was produced by protestant sects. In many cases sects that were and are un-sacramental, iconoclastic, wowsers and puritanical. So, of course, the sacraments (all of them) are ‘edited’ out of their image of early Christianity.

Then, in the 1950’s, virtually all of western Christianity that had remained ‘apostolic’ fell for the story that the early worship of the church was in essence very simple and straightforward. That the Eucharist was some sort of communal meal cum love feast that had over time become over laid by all sorts of musical, ceremonial, artistic and organisational accretions and transformed into that complex and overblown thing known as the Mass.

This was served up to Anglicans in large doses as part of the ‘liturgical renewal movement’ which set about changing the forms of worship loved by Anglicans and which set about aping the iconoclasm of the Roman Church in the 1960’s to the present day as that church took an axe to its liturgical and cultural heritage under the guise of the renewal demanded by Vatican II.

Its worth noting that by and large the Orthodox churches have never gone down the road of reformation and revolution that so characterises Christianity in the west. For the most part, Orthodox Christians are bemused by the ongoing love affair that Christianity in the west seems to have with re-inventing itself in one way or another.

We have arrived certainly at a time in the west and especially in our Anglican Church where a church like All Saints which emphasises our continuity with unbroken Orthodox, Catholic and Apostolic faith, practise and worship is, without doubt, regarded as almost completely out of step with the church of the 21st century. Many of our fellow Christians would wonder why we don't 'get it' or indeed why we don't 'get with it.'

So let us have a very brief and cursory look at the life of the Apostolic and sub-apostolic church and especially its sacraments, order and worship.

The Apostolic church was most certainly sacramental. Mention is frequently made in the New Testament of the necessity of baptism as an incorporation into the saving life death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It was not a naming ceremony, neither was baptism in the earliest days of the church simply a sign of forgiveness of sin. Those who were baptised already had their names but by baptism they did become a new creation in Jesus Christ. Any person of any Christian church who says otherwise is simply NOT being even the slightest bit honest about what the record of scripture tells.

Same is true for the Eucharist. The apostolic church celebrated the Eucharist weekly at least because they believed that, as St Paul so bluntly and explicitly teaches in 1 Corinthians, - Jesus Christ is present in the bread and wine of the Eucharist. The bread does become Christ's Body and the wine does become Christ's blood. This is the certain record of the scriptures and the certain record of the sub-apostolic church. Again anyone who says otherwise is playing fast and loose with both scripture and history.

There was the sacramental order of ministry in the church from Apostolic times which preserved for believers in Christ the purity of Apostolic teaching and which presided at every sacramental gathering of the church. The Apostolic and sub-apostolic church was most certainly an ordered and structured society with the Apostles and their successors, the bishops, with their priests and deacons at its head. Anyone who says otherwise is, once again, playing fast and loose with scripture and history.

And what should be said of the worship of the Apostolic and sub-apostolic churches? Of course there were not church buildings as such until the fourth century. However, places of Christian gathering that have survived from the second and third centuries show a very rich artistic tradition of decorative imagery based, for the most part, on Old Testament imagery. Catacombs and some houses of the wealthy that survive show that the sub-apostolic church was not wowsierish,

iconoclastic or puritanical in its forms of worship. Rich decoration was the order of the day and this explains why from the very beginnings of the fourth century, when church building became possible, and a very popular thing to do, that the earliest Christian churches were, by present day standards, incredibly richly ornamented and decorated with the best in art, carving, furniture, sacred vessels and vesture that could be afforded.

Why was all of this so? Even more briefly to answer that, it is true to say that the Apostolic and sub-apostolic church saw itself as the reality of things alluded to in allegory in the Old Testament. The church is the true temple of the living God that was foretold by the tent in the desert and the temple on Mt Zion. Jesus is the true and ever living high priest again foretold by the high priest of the temple. Jesus is also the lamb of sacrifice whose blood, unlike the blood of the rams and bulls of old, truly does wash away sin and which does truly unite man with God.

The Apostolic church was fully aware that by coming to Jesus Christ and his saving death and resurrection, all of those who receive Jesus by faith and Baptism and who receive him in Holy Communion have truly come to what was only alluded to before – the true Mount Zion where the living God, surrounded by countless angels and saints, welcomes the new creation into the joy and mystery and wonder of heaven. The worship of the apostolic and sub-apostolic church was, in all reality and certainty, seen as – the marriage feast of the lamb who was slain.

And that, dear people, is why a church like this one unashamedly says... “we stand with apostolic Christianity in proclaiming that what we do here in our sacramental worship is real – indeed it is the ultimate reality – because it is the marriage feast of the lamb”.

Here with all the reverence, tradition, beauty, music, art, architecture, ceremony, vesture, incense, lights, gestures and heartfelt devotion, in union with the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews, with all certainty we too say‘we have come to Jesus, who is the mediator of the new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks to us more graciously than the blood of Abel.’”