

### Sermon Trinity V/Ordinary Sunday 14 Year A 2023

Next door to us, in our large parish hall, is a very large gym. It is open most days from very early to quite late. We rent out the space so we can ensure this place stays open and the lights are kept on and to support the other activities and ministries of this church. It's probably fair to say that more folk turn up to that gym each week than come into this church. And that's the way of the world at present. Not to say that need be the case in the future! Stranger things have happened than populations returning to church. We have a long history. And part of that history is that periods of decline and decay give way to periods of revival and growth.

Now, it won't be a surprise to most of you that gyms really aren't my thing. I find the gym phenomenon a bit of a strange world, I must admit. And it seems to me that our obsession with gyms in *this* country is not so much about health, as about beauty. For most people engaged in gyms and gym culture, it is about shaping and maintaining the 'body beautiful'. As I'm sure you know, there are enormous pressures for both men and women to conform their bodies to a very narrow range of types.

Of course, this oughtn't to surprise us. Our age is one in which there is a general emphasis on the external and the superficial. Ours is the age of the image, not the word. Little value is placed in this country on the intellectual or the philosophical, let alone the spiritual. Now of course there is nothing wrong at all with seeking to be physically healthy. There is nothing wrong in seeking to become fit and strong. Indeed, we should encourage – especially for our young men – positive outlets for these energies. We should encourage positive outlets of commitment and discipline. These are good things!

And of course, it is not just the young who are encouraged to become fitter, stronger, more active, to move more, and to do more exercise. We all are, all the time! Your doctor has probably said it to you. But consider for a moment: what if we were to transfer some of the effort and energy given to our physical health to our spiritual health? Imagine: even if our lives were a little shorter, even if we were a little *unhealthier*, how much *better* we would *all* be if the hours spent toning, honing, pumping, running, sweating were instead spent on prayer, contemplation, and silence. Imagine: rather than obsessing about our external lives, the image of ourselves, and curating the perception people have of us, we instead curated and fostered our inner, spiritual lives. What a different world it would be!

Now, one of the traditional titles for the parish priest is the *curé*, the one who has 'the cure', or the care of souls. One who offers remedies (cures) for the ailments of *our souls*. So, today, hear your 'spiritual doctor' speaking to you.

Of course, we view our bodies as Temples of the Holy Spirit. We are not dualists or Gnostics, who deny the flesh, insisting that the spiritual must overcome the material. God has created us as *embodied creatures*. Our experience of the spiritual is mediated *through* the physical. Indeed, when God created the world, he declared it 'good.' We confess the Word was made flesh, and that Christ was raised in the flesh. Our bodies, are important, and God has bestowed upon our bodies ultimate dignity – the promise of resurrection glory, as the end of today's epistle portion reminds us. But in our context, we do not have to worry too much about an exaggerated value being given to the material and the physical! And so, a word that needs to be spoken to our surrounding culture, but to Christians first: tend to the matters of the spirit as well.

We might start by saying, our bodies are good, but they are not enough. And the key to human flourishing is not to divorce the body from the spirit but to *integrate* them, as God surely designed them to be. The insight of faith is that a life lived with undue priority given to the body, to the flesh, or the world (the different words essentially mean the same thing) give undue priority to them, then we will not find the path to life, freedom and peace. Instead, we will find a burden placed upon us that will only lead to misery, emptiness, and a heaviness of heart.

Saint Paul suggests as much in the epistle portion from his Letter to the Romans we hear today. Now, for the last few weeks we have been engaged in a sweeping survey of this towering monument of the New Testament corpus. At the heart of Paul's argument placed before us today is the idea that because of Christ's victory over death, a new reality is to take hold of believers. Paul here has a very 'high view' of the consequences of Christ's saving action. The Holy Spirit himself dwells in us. This is precisely how we belong to Christ. We belong to Christ because the Spirit of God who raised Jesus to life is the same Spirit who makes his home - dwells - in us. Because of this 'high view' of Christ's saving work in the believer, well then, there are 'high' consequences. Essentially, the consequences are that we are to live lives worthy of the Spirit who makes his dwelling among us. Paul puts the option to us quite simply. *We are debtors not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh - for if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body you will live.*

Now, we live in a time and a place where every base human desire, every need and every want must be catered to. We are frequently told that there should be no limits to human behaviour, because, 'who are we to judge,' and 'as long as you don't hurt anyone'. And where once we might have said, 'Well, what people do in the privacy of their own homes is up to them,' now we are in a situation where every perversion, and desire, and expression of personal identity must not only be publicly accommodated but celebrated. I should not have to spell out to you what a disaster this is, that man be slave to his passions.

Paul would of course agree with this! Again, he puts it so bluntly, *To live according to the flesh is death!* The wisdom of the ages is that man is a lousy master of his passions. His passions are destructive. They must be tempered. Under the banner of 'freedom' we instead find people entrapped in a miserable prison of their own making. This is why Christ's words in the gospel today are so true and are so powerful: he brings true freedom, true liberation. His burden is light! And those who have experienced this know that this is indeed 'gospel' – good news.

But lest we point the finger, we ought to remember that unbalanced disordered priorities toward the things of the flesh are not limited to hardened secularists, god-deniers, and atheists! It is just as easy for those who profess Christian faith to live effectively as atheists. That is, there are plenty of Christians who live as if God did not exist. There are plenty of Christians who live as if this world was all that matters. There are plenty of Christians who view the highest good as their work, or their leisure, or to maintaining a certain level of comfort and security.

So, as your curé, your 'spiritual doctor', I invite you to do an audit of your lives. What percentage of your week, your day, is given over to what we might call the things of the spirit? What have you built into your life that builds up and supports your life of faith? What do you read or watch or listen to that does this? How is your faith practiced for the 166 hours a week you are not here? What is part of your regular pattern of life that builds up your spiritual muscle? It is a sure truth, that if the things of God are not what shapes and directs our life, then something else will. Start by simply having a godly conversation with someone! We are very good at talking about the weather or sport or politics. But do we – even with each other – talk about the things of God?

The gospel is not anti-human or anti-world. That would rob Christ of his saving power. But it does involve a question of priority and right order. If the world/flesh has priority, well that is going to show, that is going to have a real and concrete impact on our lives. It will have a real impact on the eternal destiny of our souls as well. And it will create a burden we ultimately cannot bear. As Paul sees it, the Spirit - the sign of our belonging to Christ - is to be the determining force in our lives. So, live lives worthy of such a guest! Do so, and we will show our true belonging to Christ. Do so, and we will en-flesh within our very selves the ultimate dignity and destiny we were made for. Amen.