

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 22 Year A 2023

In this church we are blessed with a fine set of stained-glass windows. I hope you have actually noticed them. At times it is surprising when reference is made to a certain window in this church some people will spend, *what window is that? I've never noticed*. There are in fact three broad styles of windows in this church. The earliest being the Australian windows of Christ and the evangelists in the sanctuary apse. We also have a fine set of English glass, such as those in the Lady Chapel, and those depicting the Annunciation on the north side, and the birth and childhood of Christ near the baptistry. And then, there is the set of what are known as the Munich Style windows. They are found in the two transepts, and the brightly coloured windows here in the nave. They depict Christ blessing the children, Christ in the house of Mary and Martha, and The Visitation tucked away in the war memorial. On the south side we see the quite unusual the depiction of the Revelation of Saint John, and The Raising of Lazarus. And perhaps most uniquely, the depiction of the Betrayal of Judas over the west door.

All of the windows here in the nave, (the central part of the church you are seated) are panels made of two parts. The English windows are all made of two separate panels, distinct and self-contained. In the Annunciation window, for example, one panel depicts Mary, the other the angel Gabriel. But the Munich style glass in the nave shows you one scene but *cut* dramatically in half. In other words, the window wouldn't sense without the two together. Consider the window here of Jesus blessing the children. Jesus' own knees and his hand of blessing cut through both panels! A great stone pillar separates the scene. The window wouldn't make sense unless seen together. If you take the right panel, you would just have a bunch of children at someone's disembodied feet, a hand hovering over their heads. If you just took the left panel, you would have Jesus looking over nothing, missing a knee and a hand. The two belong together.

In a similar way, the gospel text placed before us today is the second of two panels. To understand what we are looking at today, we also need to see what is placed beside it. What is placed beside it was the text we heard last week, with Jesus asking the question, *who do men say that I am*, with Peter emphatically declaring, *you are the Christ, the Son of the living God*. Jesus responded that this was a God-given insight, a God-given revelation, and that Peter, or at least the faith he expressed, would be the rock on which the church would be built.

If that scene, and what we hear today, were indeed depicted in stained glass, the first part of Peter's confession might have rich, bright, light colours. It is a scene of insight, of rare illumination, where truth is recognised and rewarded. But in the scene we hear today, the colours might be more muted, toned down, sombre even. Because whatever insight and clarity Peter expressed in the first part of the story is lost in the second.

What further unites these two parts of the one account is a clever play of words. In the first story Simon is called Peter, the rock on which the church will be built. The second, Peter is called Satan, the stumbling block. If we were to name our two panels, the first might be *Peter the Rock*. The second *Peter the Stumbling Block*. In the first, the image is of a foundation stone. The second, an awkward and dangerous obstacle. (Those who get carried away with the doctrine of the Petrine Primacy, tend to overlook this!....) And whereas Jesus *affirmed* Peter's declaration, *you are the Christ, the Son of the living God*, as a God-given revelation, in what we hear today Peter's declaration is *dismissed* as not divine thinking but human thinking. *You are an obstacle in my path, because the way you think is not God's but man's*.

That the first part of the story was incomplete was revealed in the very last verse we heard last week and gives way to the account today: *Then he gave the disciples strict orders not to tell anyone that he was the Christ*. Now, on the face of it, this would seem a curious thing to say, if we indeed left the story there. Why, after Peter's bold and emphatic declaration of Our Lord's identity, be then told not to share this? The 'why' is revealed in what we hear today. Peter's recognition of who Christ is – even if it is correct - must be filled out with what *kind* of Christ Jesus is. And this is what the gospel portion today tells us. Jesus is the Christ who will suffer, be put to death and be raised on the third day. And because Peter's faith is that upon which the church is built, then the correct faith - the *full* faith - is important. And this full faith includes Jesus' suffering and death.

All this to say, how important it is to maintain the whole picture! As I mentioned last week, apply a faulty category to try and understand who Jesus is, then we will end up with a faulty conclusion. This is a case in point. Yes, Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. But what that looks like Jesus today tells us. And if Jesus' messiahship means suffering, then part of the foundation on which the church is built includes suffering for the followers of Jesus. In other words, a correct understanding of who the Messiah is means something for Jesus, and a correct understanding of who the Messiah is means something for his disciples.

How important, then, to keep in view of what we might call the *whole Christ*. Not the Christ we prefer, or who simply thinks, acts and believes in line with our own unredeemed preferences, but whole Christ. The suffering Christ along with triumphant Christ. The miraculous Christ along with the silent Christ. The comforting Christ along with the confronting Christ. It is very easy to love, worship and adore a Christ in line with our own prejudices. It is very easy to follow a Christ who conforms with our own way of looking at the world. It is very easy to serve a Christ who doesn't demand of us more than we are willing to give.

This past week the new archbishop of Brisbane was announced. Bishop Jeremy Greaves will succeed archbishop Philip Aspinall. The appointment has been met with cheers from the progressive corners of the church and moans of despair from the orthodox wing. Understand, Bishop Greaves is a man who does not believe in the literal resurrection of Christ, who thinks that the creeds ought to be done away with in public worship, and who supports every progressive cause that seduces the church of our age. Of course, his appointment continues a long tradition of bishops who do not actually believe the tenets of the faith. And continues an equally long tradition of bishops who suppose that they can improve on the faith Christ imparted to his apostles. We know that he will not - with honesty and integrity – be able to give the oaths and declarations required of a bishop. Because he does not believe them. But he will make them nonetheless. We must be frank about such men and declare them apostate. In a gospel image from elsewhere, here is nothing less than a wolf in sheep's clothing. Now, of course, his supporters will argue that he will bring much needed change, that he will present a positive face of the church to the world, and that he will endeavour to make the church more relevant. But in the terms we have been considering today – the proclamation of *the whole Christ* – we must ask, well, what kind of Christ is exactly being proclaimed here? And are the proposals of Bishop Greaves and his like something which builds up the church or instead are stumbling blocks?

The classic progressive error is to only propose a *partial Christ*. Mostly, it is the Christ of love, mercy and welcome, and such. This is, we know, an appealing image. And yes, Christ is these things. But he is not *just* these things. It ignores the Christ of truth, of judgment, of righteousness, and the One who calls to repentance. Now you might be thinking, *why does Fr René keep on banging on about those dreadful progressives? Why keep on about those nasty revisionist and pesky liberals?*

Because their voice is loud and it is seductive. And because they are wrong. They proclaim a half Christ. A faulty Christ. Which is of course no Christ at all. Remember, Our Lord in the gospel today *rejects* Peter's inadequate interpretation of who he is, as *the thinking of men*. We may gain the world, but lose our lives. Well, so too, we must reject the inadequate and partial Christ of relevance, acceptance and tolerance as likewise being the thinking of men. It is nothing less than a stumbling block, an obstacle to true faith.

To proclaim the authentic Christ, it must be the 'full Christ'. To live an authentic Christian life, it must be in service of the full Christ. To authentically believe in Christ is to believe the full Christ. But so proclaiming, believing and living is nothing less than the path to true life. Amen.