

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 18 Year B 2024

Even if you are not especially a sport enthusiast, it would not have passed your notice that last weekend the 33rd Olympiad opened in Paris. After 128 years of the modern Olympics, it would be fair to say that the opening ceremony Friday week ago (early Saturday morning our time) has become the most controversial ever. The controversy has circled around some of the strange decisions made by the organisers and artistic director. Not only did the opening ceremony have the Olympic anthem sung before an image of a golden calf. Not only did a decapitated image of Marie Antoinette holding her own bloodied head appear. But most notably, a blasphemous tableau was featured modelled on Da Vinci's iconic Last Supper featuring drag queens, transsexuals, and others who identify as 'queer'. The gross perversion was completed by the elements of the Last Supper replaced with a grotesque figure of Bacchus, the Greek god of wine and debauchery. The tableau made all the more sinister by the presence of children.

The responses were as swift as they were damning. Many pointed to St Paul and his letter to the Galatians: "*Be not deceived, God is not mocked. For what things a man shall sow, those also shall he reap. For he that soweth in his flesh, of the flesh also shall reap corruption.*" And rightly, many of the responses have pushed against all those who have insisted, 'nothing to see here.' The organisers and the performers have confirmed that what was seen was *exactly* what was intended! Predictably, there have been those who have said this is just another case of shrill, snowflake Christians eager to be offended. But we take it seriously because it *is* serious. Sin is serious and there is no greater sin than that of blasphemy. All other sins are directed against the self or against our neighbour. But blasphemy is the greatest sin because it is a sin against God.

Certainly, this is not the first time offence has been directed against Christians. The gospel promises it. And we can endure no greater shame or mockery than what our Lord himself endured. We and our faith have been the subject of mockery since the beginning. And France has a particular history of blasphemy. At the Revolution, Notre Dame was confiscated from the church and dedicated to the goddess Reason. Prostitutes were installed at the high altar. France was once regarded as the eldest daughter of the church. So, if nothing else, last week's debacle has highlighted (once more) the West's decline. (Though needless to say, no other religious group was object to public mockery...) The weak apology for 'offence caused' from the organisers that ensued wasn't really an apology, but a regret that people had taken offence.

I have said from this pulpit before, that the church needs to wake up to the hostility of the surrounding culture. What we saw in Paris last week was a cheap stunt by throwing stones at a group known best (perhaps) for being meek and mild, but also known for being tolerant and forgiving. After all, Christians won't respond by burning things down or blowing things up when offence is taken... But what we also saw in Paris was how our cultural elites *despise* the church, how those who run our public institutions have *contempt* for the church. They did not even attempt to hide it! They saw it fit that before a worldwide and captive audience they could broadcast this contempt in the form of their debased, depraved and debauched ideology.

The temptation in this whole debacle is to make the issue about us – our offence. But as I said earlier, the gospel promises us nothing less. The darkness despises the light. The issue is Christ being mocked. And just as we rightly protect and defend those whom we love and care for, it is right that Christians should uphold Christ's honour whom we love and adore. To be silent is to be complicit. To shrug our shoulders and say, 'so what' is only to add to the offence. But if nothing else, what the Opening Ceremony gives faithful and sincere believers is a final warning: this is where we are heading! Prepare yourselves!

Now, I mentioned last week that the gospel readings for the next several weeks takes us deep into John 6 and the Bread of Life discourse. And I promised then that we would have a careful exploration of this important text over four weeks looking at the Eucharist as Bread for the Journey, as the Body of Christ, as Thanksgiving and as the Banquet of Eternal life. When I was beginning to sketch out where these weeks might take us, I was not expecting a curved ball from the Olympics!

But there is in fact a strange confluence in the issue presented and what we have set out to explore. By wondrous irony, those who engineered the debacle claimed that the opening ceremony was to be a celebration of inclusion and tolerance 'a place for everybody.' Barbara Butch, the self-described "fat, Jewish, queer lesbian" who depicted Jesus in The Last Supper tableau, said on her social media that her aim was to "unite people" and to "share love". She also acknowledged the deliberate parody of the Last Supper, posting a photo of her performance alongside Da Vinci's Last Supper, and labelling it as the "gay new testament."

A Paris2024 spokesperson has said, “Clearly, there was never an intention to show disrespect towards any religious group or belief. On the contrary, each of the tableaux in the...Opening Ceremony were intended to celebrate community and tolerance.” Surely this is nothing more than a case of Orwellian Newspeak where inclusion is used to be exclusive, tolerance is used to be intolerant, community is used for division.

Which begs the question: *where, then, is true unity to be found?* It is surely the witness of 2000 years of Christian history that the church – unique amongst all human associations – where unity is best expressed. Imperfectly, yes. But no other institution in human history has ever come close to the church’s capacity to hold people together of different sex, age, nationality, ethnicity, socio-economic background, occupation, ability, disability, political persuasion, or theological conviction. Saint Paul’s words ring true: *One Lord, one, faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all!* This is where unity is found. Through Christ. In the church! Not in some pathetic experiment of social engineering.

This unity is given perfect expression in the church’s most sacred and solemn rite: the Eucharist. (And why it was seen as the target of parody.) Our unity comes from the core conviction of what Christians say the Eucharist is. Again, Saint Paul telling the church in Corinth: *the bread which we break is it not a communion/a participation in the body of Christ? The cup that we share is this not a communion/ a participation in the blood of Christ?* For good reason, one name we apply to the Eucharist is *Holy Communion*. Communion simply meaning to be made ‘one with’, a ‘participation with’. In communion we are made one with Christ, we participate, in Christ’s very life.

Saint Augustine, confirms this when he says, *you ought to know what you have received....that the bread which you see on the altar, consecrated by the Word of God, is the body of Christ. The chalice.....consecrated by the Word of God, is the blood of Christ.* I said last week that *we are made for God.* That is what we are created for. And we will only be impoverished, only lead half-lives, if we live in denial or resistance to that. We are made for God, for union – communion – with him. Christ offers us the real deal! And this is not something that remains impossibly remote or unachievable. It is made possible every time we share in the mass. Unity is our ultimate destiny. The mass is a foretaste of this. Whatever the world tries to sell us is only a pathetic and cheap substitute. We can be joined to Christ by sharing in Christ. We become part of his body by participating in his body.

And this directs us to the second meaning of Body of Christ in the New Testament. Yes, the bread of the Eucharistic elements. But also, the community of the baptised. The church also is the Body of Christ. Importantly, Saint Paul combines these ideas and by doing so highlights the unity at the heart of both: *the bread is one, we though many, are one body*. The Church Fathers also delighted in seeing bread as a powerful symbol of unity. The many grains of wheat ground and joined together to become one bread. Saint Augustine went a step further when he said *become what you eat*. In other words, as we share in the bread of the Eucharist - the body of Christ - we seek to become the Body of Christ, the church. Being united to Christ, we become united to each other.

What we saw unfold in Paris a week or so ago was *not* a celebration of unity or community, let alone tolerance. It was a perversion of these. But what we also saw was a drawing of battles lines. We saw an inversion of what Christians hold most dear with an affront to the very created order; the inversion of Christ's own perfect self-offering with an image of self-indulgence and self-autonomy. It should leave us in no doubt about the diabolical origin of it all. And it leaves us in no doubt that what we are experiencing is a spiritual battle. The point of it all is not our offence. This we should expect. The point is that we should recommit to our solemn and holy mission. Our mission of proposing - in season and out of season - the life of love and communion made possible only by faith in Christ. Our task is to witness that in his Body and through his Body *true unity* is found. Amen.