

## **Sermon Septuagesima/Ordinary Sunday 6 Year C 2025**

In the noise, and distraction of contemporary life, it can be difficult to discern what voices to listen to. In the clamour of competing assertions, it can be difficult to work out what is worth taking up and what we need to reject. Competing and clamouring voices are not unknown in the life of the church! And how do we sift through it all? What weight do we give different claims? Some Christians - some churches - will happily reject sacred scripture and almost completely abandon any sign of traditional faith, and insist on their right to remain. And others will be forced to leave over trivial matters. If the priest puts candles on the altar or starts wearing vestments. Or if the hymns and other music are not their personal liking... Different weight given to different ideas. Some voices are allowed to dominate, and others are silenced.

Now, the church does have built into it some sort of measure and guide by which we judge what is of central importance and what is secondary. Chief of these are the creeds. This year is the 1700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Council of Nicaea. From May to July in the year 325 the bishops of the church met in response to the claim that the Son of God was not co-equal and co-eternal with the Father. And the Council battled out that idea and proposed a summary statement of the key Christian beliefs: the Nicene Creed.

I am pleased to announce that we will celebrate this momentous anniversary here later in the year. More on that in the fullness of time. But this anniversary is worth celebrating because we all need reminding – and especially in this day and age – of the parameters, the boundaries of the faith. Christians are quite free to believe and say what they want. But let's not pretend that all of it is useful, good or true! The creed is the 'rule' of faith. It provides the lens by which we interpret everything else, the standard by which we can judge and discern some of the competing voices. And there *is* actually a high degree of accommodation within this. Within the parameters there *is* an ability to hold together a great deal of messiness and complexity.

But Christian faith is more than a set of theological or intellectual propositions. Christian faith is not just a set of formal beliefs we assent to. It is also a way life. What this life looks like in part is what is laid out for us in the gospel reading today. And what we see there amounts to nothing less than a complete reversal of values. In short, success, happiness and fulfilment will not come from the usual places we expect to find them. And the model of life proposed by Christ here is as challenging now as then.

But what is outlined in the gospel today has the ring of sage advice that any number of philosophical or religious traditions might tell us how to act. And it doesn't really make any sense except in the light of what we hear today from Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. There in bold logic the apostle Paul outlines the central importance of the Resurrection.

The Creed might help us sift through some competing voices. But unless we have the absolute basic foundation in place nothing else – including the way we live – will make sense.

Now, it is very easy to hear the gospel text placed before us today (and it's equivalent in Matthew's gospel), and to find there some sort of program for social improvement. A pattern for 'making the world a better place.' But this once more highlights the importance of the reading the whole of scripture, the importance of keeping all the themes and threads together. And this so that the program for justice or care for the poor, the vulnerable and the marginalised is ordered in a proper manner. Paul makes a clear point: *if our hope is for this life only, we are the most unfortunate of all people*. The manner such works and projects are properly ordered is through the lens of the Resurrection, the ultimate horizon on which these things are placed.

Because why should we live a life as outlined by Jesus in the gospel today? Why should we turn our lives upside down? Why should we put up with persecution and trouble for the sake of Christ? We should our values and our behaviours be at such odds with dominant modes of living? On one level, we could answer, 'well because Our Lord tells us so'. But even past that. Why listen to him in the first place? Why should we take his word seriously? Why should we conform our lives both to the pattern of his life and in obedience to his commands? Why any of that? For Paul, the answer to all that is the Resurrection. The Resurrection by which Jesus is shown to be the faithful and true witness. The Resurrection by which we are given our ultimate hope. And we cannot live out the practical and social teaching as outlined for us in the gospel today without the resurrection life Jesus gives us.

It is perhaps a deficiency, if not quite a failure, of liturgical forms of worship, in that we do not always give full weight to the importance of the resurrection that we ought. So, we can in liturgical churches, somewhat limit our recollection of the Resurrection to Easter and to an attitude which says, 'Well, we've dealt that mystery of Christian faith for another year...' Now, of course it is not quite as simple as that. And again, it is why something like the Creed is so important.

Week in and week out we place before us this mystery: *He suffered and was buried. And the third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures*. But Paul is of no doubt. The resurrection is of central importance. All of Christian faith – as St Paul so rightly puts to us – is an outworking of the implications of the Resurrection. And anything which diminishes this is a departure from Christian faith.

Now, what Paul is responding to in the first place in our text today appears to be a situation in which members of the Corinthian church reject an idea, not so much of the resurrection of Jesus, but the idea of the general resurrection of all believers. In orthodox Christian faith the two are connected: Jesus' resurrection is a foretaste of what will be *ours* at the end of time. Jesus' resurrection is an anticipation of *our* resurrection. That is why Paul invests it with such importance. And our resurrection – like Christ's – will be a *bodily* resurrection. Not a vague 'going to be with God forever'. Not 'our souls will escape our bodies and our souls alone will be raised'. Which, it must be said, is the common (though mistaken) idea most people (even most Christians!) have about the resurrection. That somehow it just concerns our 'souls'.

We see this expressed in a little prayer commonly used by the sanctuary party in Anglo Catholic and High Church circles at the end of mass. Originally a prayer used in monastic communities at the end of their offices. A prayer that goes, *May the Divine assistance remain with us always, and may the souls of the faithful departed through the mercy of God rest in peace.* And the prayer ought to end there. *Amen.* But some mistakenly add *and rise in glory.* Servers and singers take note! In Christian belief souls *do not* rise in glory! Bodies do! Rightly do we pray that souls may rest in peace. But it is our bodies that will rise in glory. A simple example of our pious practice getting it wrong.

All this to say that the New Testament witness has such overwhelming positive message to say about our bodies and about our physicality. And this certainly stands as an important counter-message to those who see our bodies as a problem, that our bodies are dysfunctional, that it has all these issues. It can lead some to think that our bodies are rightfully despised, as unworthy of God and unworthy of us in our eternal hope. But as the Resurrection of Christ shows, God has redeemed our bodies. God has brought them into his own eternity. And as he has for Christ so he will for us: clothe them with glory and honour. And this is because the destiny of all who hope in Christ is a participation in the destiny of Christ himself. *We are the body of Christ. We are in him and he is in us. We will be like him.* His destiny is an anticipation of our destiny.

Paul today reminds us of the heart of the matter. He proposes the very foundations of our faith, the very key to which we unlock all other beliefs. Have this in place then we will be able to sort through much else besides. If we want to understand who Jesus is - and what God has worked through him, and how that impacts us - then we need to start (and end!) with the resurrection. It is in the light of the empty tomb we come to see the full implications of what faith in Jesus involves. Amen.