

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 8 Year C 2025 (Quinquagesima)

Every sphere of life has its own particular language, every profession and even organization or society has its own peculiar words and turns of phrase. In the church we too have our own language. It touches on our worship, our theology, on how we order and govern ourselves. It touches on our prayer life and our shared life. There is a unique church language regarding our art and architecture and our music. There are words and ideas which we are familiar with, but others outside the church far less so.

Just a couple weeks ago, I was somewhat surprised when showing our archdeacon the church here. She didn't know the names of the different parts of the church. She didn't know her narthex from her nave. *'I need to learn them'* she said, *'when churches ask for a faculty.'* Some if you may be sitting there thinking, *'Well I don't know half of what Fr René just said as well! What is a narthex or a nave? What is an archdeacon? And what on earth is a faculty?!'* Now if you know these things, blessed are you among Anglicans! But there will be some here today who don't know the meaning of those words. And if that's so, well that's ok. There's always something more to learn. (Though we might expect a little more from an archdeacon....) And, if you didn't know and want to, a nave is where you are all seated, and a narthex is the space at the back of the church (past the screen), between the entrance and the nave.

Now all this means we have to be a little careful about presuming people's knowledge. Some of us may have been around a long time and know a lot of our 'church language.' But many others don't. And we should be patient with them. And not turn up our noses when people don't know what we are talking about. Now, some in the church have taken this to mean we have to strip the church of its unique and specific language. They have taken it as a cue to adopt a 'lowest common denominator' approach to our faith. But I think a more helpful approach is to maintain the integrity of our language and seek to draw others into it.

Now many of the key words in our 'church language' had a use before they were adopted by the church. Indeed, the word 'church' is one of them. But so too words like bishop, apostle and martyr. The all had a usage in the ancient Greek-speaking world, but were picked up by the church as useful. Another such word is 'gospel'. Without doubt, if you have hung around church for a while you will know this word.

At every mass - as we did just a moment ago - we announce one of the bible readings as, 'the Continuation of the Holy Gospel according to.... Today, Luke, but of course at other times Matthew, Mark or John. So, we use 'gospel' to denote a certain type of writing. The word *euangelion* is a compound word where *eu* means 'good' and *angelion* means 'announcement'. So, gospel is literally means 'good announcement', 'good news'. In ancient Rome, the word *euangelion* was commonly used to announce a military victory. Messengers from the winning side would proclaim the good news of victory to the conquered territories. But it was also used in the Roman imperial cult to describe a message of salvation from a divine figure.

This sense of 'announcing' good news is what is conveyed in the very opening verse of Mark's gospel: *The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ the Son of God*. But again, what do we mean by this. What is 'gospel', as Christians understand it? What is the 'good news' being announced? If someone were to ask you, what is *the* gospel? Would you be able to answer? If you were quizzed, 'What is the 'good news' of Jesus Christ?' What might you say?

Truth be told, we could respond in quite a number of ways. But amongst them Saint Paul's assertion on the centrality of the resurrection must be considered key. As I mentioned here a couple of weeks ago, the resurrection of Jesus – and so our resurrection too – is at the heart of the Christian gospel. Now for the past few weeks we have had placed before parts of a long and sustained argument from 1 Corinthians 15 in which Paul proposes the primacy of the resurrection and its consequences. We come to the end of that long chapter in the short reading placed before us today. A towering summary of all that he has been arguing for. It means that when we consider what is Gospel? what does it mean? how do we 'interpret' this aspect of our language? we might answer with Paul: *Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O Death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?*

Throughout this chapter Paul rightly identifies that the resurrection is not only the anchor of our faith, but its goal as well. It is 'gospel' precisely because Christ's victory over sin and death allows *us* to have victory over sin and death. And so he ends with a bold encouragement to his readers: *My beloved be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labour is not in vain*. In other translations: *Never give in my dear brothers, never admit defeat*.

It is with this in mind, then, that we now turn our attention to the holy season of Lent. We do so mindful that the resurrection is both the foundation of our faith and its destination. The gospel placed before us today creates a helpful entrée, then, into the penitential season before us. It highlights how Our Lord proposes a high level of authenticity for those who seek to follow him. The portion from Luke's gospel today again continues what we've been hearing for a few weeks now, on the practical consequences of faith in Jesus.

Faith in Jesus is not simply a matter of the heart. It is not simply a case of spiritual and internal conversion, much less a case of good intentions. Faith, even while it certainly does seek to shape and convert the heart and mind, must also find practical, concrete expression. In other words, Christian faith must be *an integrated faith*. It is not just a matter of the mind or the heart or the spirit. It is also a matter of lived consequence, a faith that is experienced. A faith which can be seen. In the same way, it cannot just be about the externals, about activism, or about experience. Because these cannot be sustained with any authenticity if they do not emerge from interior conversion. And this too is gospel, good news. Resurrection life - a new life - can be experienced here and now.

It is in the hope of realising this new life for us, here and now, that we ought recall Paul's words again: *my beloved be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord... Never give in my dear brothers, never admit defeat*. We should strive to realise Christ's victory here and now. So, we do not approach Lent as some sort of spiritual self-help, or as a season of personal therapy with a pious overlay. We undertake this period of penitence and self-denial so to better realize the victory Christ has won for us! It is essentially a means to help us prepare for the joy, wonder and mystery of Easter. In other words, Holy Church invites us to participate in Lent so that we might grow into the good news. Lent is not the grim, pessimistic, dismal season that it is often imagined to be. In the wisdom of the church Lent isn't just about an internal spiritual servicing. It's not just about getting 'my personal relationship with God' a bit better. That would only make our good new, 'sort of OK news'. But Lent is good news. So don't hesitate or draw back from it! It is good news precisely because it seeks to orient us back to the foundation *and* destination of our faith: the resurrection. It is with this clear goal we claim for ourselves: *Be steadfast, immovable. Never give in. Never admit defeat*. Amen.