

FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

Year C

31st January 2010

Paul spelt out his understanding of the Church in the metaphor of the Body of Christ in 1 Cor. 12.12-31 which we read last week. He recognized its identity and integrity, its cohesion, the mutual care and inter-relatedness of its members, and the giftedness of its members for the benefit of its purpose. Today's reading (1 Cor. 13.1-13) gives a qualification. The gifts of oratory, insight, faith and self-denial are worthless without the patient, kind, generous and unselfish gift of love.

All other gifts are limited to this world and come to an end. This is true of our knowledge of God and of all our religious experience. We think we know God now. We think we know what his will for the world is and we assume we know how best to relate to him in worship and prayer. Many people assume these things and we have disagreements with people who think differently from ourselves. Paul says that our present knowledge of God belong to our childhood in the Christian faith. There will be full maturity when we come face to face with God in the life to come.

And what of our gifts in the life to come? Then our earthly gifts will be of no avail. It will not matter if we have great theological knowledge, or wonderful talents in teaching or music or organization or any other gift or ability which we prize here. What will be recognized is our faith, hope and love—particularly love. Even on earth other gifts are of no avail unless they are exercised with love.

Verses 4-7 spells out the behaviour of someone with the gift of love and it is a great checklist for each of us. You might try the exercise of substituting your name for the word 'love'; in those lines. E.g. Marjorie is patient etc. How does it judge you? When have you been impatient, unkind, envious, boastful, arrogant, rude, irritable, and sometimes even enjoying or encouraging behaviour like this in others.

The Church community needs to be a practice field and a breeding ground of love. "They'll know we are Christian by our love". This is our calling: to be a community of love whose mission in the world is to extend that love to bring justice, mercy and compassion to others.

THE BAPTISM OF OUR LORD

Year C

10th January 2010

The Spirit in the New Testament always represents the in-breaking power of the age to come and so it is in today's gospel. (Luke 3.15-22). The focus today is not on John the Baptist. For Luke, John is the last of the Old Testament prophets, pointing the way to the age to come. Rather, the focus is on God's action in the Spirit, giving power to Jesus to begin his ministry. The descent of the Spirit and the voice from heaven are acts of God, marking the beginning of the coming of the reign of God in the person of Jesus, whose purpose on earth was to redeem God's people.

We often think of belonging to the Church, or supporting Christianity as a good cause. Is that how most people think? Is that how you think? We get anxious when the institution of the Church is in trouble. We worry about survival. We are concerned that there are fewer baptisms and confirmations than there used to be, and fewer weddings in church. We get concerned about our numbers. But we have got it all wrong if we focus on institutional things. The New Testament is more concerned about the mighty acts of God and how we respond to them.

The coming of the Holy Spirit into Jesus' life at baptism was a momentous event: it affirmed his calling to ministry and gave him divine power and authority for his ministry. Baptism in the name of Jesus was with water and Spirit (Acts 8.14-17) and it was a moment when the old was washed away and a new age of spiritual power was bestowed on the followers of Jesus.

How do we regard our own baptism. Do we see it primarily as a membership rite which must be accepted if we want to belong to an earthly institution, or do we see it as a new beginning, a time when God entered our life with the power of the Spirit, authorizing us for ministry and marking us out as members of the age to come? Think about your own Baptism. What difference does it make to you if you see it as being endowed with God's power for ministry? What assurance does it bring? What confidence does it give? How will you respond to this act of God in your life?

SECOND SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

Year C

17th January 2010

We live in an age of change. Those of us who grew up through the first three-quarters of the last century remember the stability of our youth (despite depression and wars and rumours of war) and look with amazement at the changes we have seen in our lifetime, particularly the IT revolution, means of travel, advances in medicine and many social changes. Yet despite this environment of change, many churchgoers don't like to see change in the church.

Today we might call Jesus an 'agent of change'. You will recall that Jesus' Baptism was the beginning of his ministry. In Jesus God signaled the 'age to come' for Jesus proclaimed (in Mark) that as he began his ministry 'the kingdom of God had come near'. He was sent by God to inaugurate a new age and his miracles are portrayed in the gospels as foretastes of heaven and signs that the kingdom of God had come with power. In John's gospel today (John 2.1-11, we have the first miracle at Cana which is regarded as a sign by John of the coming age. Water becomes wine—a miracle of change.

It is hard for us today even to believe in this miracle or to understand the circumstances and Jesus' words. The evangelist saw it as a sign of what was to come. "My hour has not yet come" said Jesus. The hour he spoke of was the hour of the passion where the Jewish rites of purification (v. 6) were replaced by the purification achieved on the cross. It was the supreme moment of Jesus' glorification. The miracle at Cana was purely a sign of the glory to come. It was a sign of God's power but the full manifestation of that power was to come to fulfillment in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

This was a miracle of change. Jesus is the one who brought change to the sick, to the outcast, to the guilty, to the self-righteous and to the oppressed. His death and resurrection heralded a new resurrection age for all people, a redeemed world.

God achieves change in us in Baptism. He gives us the Spirit to work in us so that we too can be agents of change in our time and in our world, and to accept change in ourselves and the church for the sake of the gospel. For some people the challenge will be global, but for most of us it will be local. We can make a difference, if, trusting in the power of the Spirit given to each of us in Baptism, we reach out to be agents of change to make a better world.

THIRD SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

Year C

24th January 2010

In recent years the doctrine of the Church (what we call ecclesiology) has had a lot of attention. To some extent this has been demanded by our understanding that the authors of the Bible did not write as individuals in isolation but as members of the chosen people for the chosen people. So these questions arise—Who are the chosen people? How did they get chosen? How do we understand the covenant that unites them with God and to one another? What is the meaning of the Church? What is the Church for? Indeed you might recognize these as titles of recent books.

Our understanding of the Church as the people of God can be traced back through the Old Testament. We know of the call and promise to Abraham, the rescue from the Egyptians, the entry to the promised land. But the recognition of the identity of the people came in exile. The reading from Nehemiah 8 shows that the reading of the law brought home to the people that theirs was a unique heritage. From the time of the exile the Jewish people separated themselves from others and grew in their understanding of themselves as unique.

Jesus came to fulfil the Law and the prophets and to make all things new. The Church became the People of God. His new creation of the Church was achieved through his death and resurrection. In the power of the Spirit we are united in his body to be the Church, the Body of Christ on earth. Paul spelt out his understanding of the Church in the metaphor of the Body of Christ in 1 Cor. 12.12-31. He recognized its identity and integrity, its cohesion, the mutual care and inter-relatedness of its members, and the giftedness of its members for the benefit of its purpose.

And what is the Church for?: in the power of the Spirit to be the Body of Christ and to share in his purpose; so Jesus' mission (Luke 4. 18) is our mission. The universal Church, the Anglican Communion, the Diocese, our own congregation are all manifestations of the Church charged with the responsibility of being good news in our communities. Examine the mission of your Church—how do you bring good news to people in your community and the wider world? To the poor? Those captive to illness, disadvantage, oppression,? Those blind to the possibilities which life holds for them? How can you better fulfil your purpose as God's people?