

## **Holy Monday 2017**

### ***The Sacraments – a door to the sacred***

It is a commonplace observation that the world consists of the seen and the unseen; material and spiritual

The material is always more pressing: for those who are starving the only thing that matters is getting food.

But once the material needs are met, some people seek to satisfy their different spiritual needs. For example, back in the 1960's the Beatles, once they had made it as band, went in search of the meaning of life in eastern religions.

The material and the spiritual can be enemies: we can be so obsessed with the one that we have little time for the other:

The world is too much with us; late and soon,  
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers

Wordsworth

or

What is this world if full of care  
we have no time to stand and stare

W H Davies

But this week I want to talk not about enmity between the spiritual and the material but about how one opens up the other. When Christians talk about sacraments, we are talking of how the material world gives us an insight into the spiritual world; of how God uses very ordinary things to become very special things; of how, for example, very ordinary bread and wine can become for us the body and blood of Christ. Or about how marriage can give us

an insight into the nature of the love between Christ and his church – his bride.

This sacramental understanding of the material world is, I believe central to orthodox Christianity. And it means that some understandings of the world are excluded.

For example, there have been at various times over the centuries, Christian sects which have regarded the material world as evil, or at least quite definitely inferior to the spiritual. And of course, such attitudes are found in some eastern spiritualities. This leads men and women to embrace poverty, celibacy and fasting as a way of renouncing evil materialism.

That is not the true Christian understanding. Some men and women give up sex because they have been specifically called by God to do so - not because sex is wrong. In Lent many Christians fast as a means of prayer, as a means of keeping physical appetites in check - but on Easter day feast again! William Temple, once Archbishop; of Canterbury, claimed that

'Christianity is the most avowedly materialistic of all the great religions.'

It was, after all, the Christian God, and the Jewish and Moslem God, who made the world in six days 'and saw that it was very good.' It was the Christian God who loved the world so much that he took on human flesh and became man in Jesus Christ.

So, how do we understand the material world? Perhaps as a door. Now doors can be very attractive but the key feature of a door is that you use it to pass through to a room beyond. You use the material to enter the spiritual; or you use the secular to enter the sacred.

But there is a danger in this image. We can suppose that it is we who open the door. Or perhaps more specifically the power of the priest. It is the priest who manipulates God whether in the mass or in baptism or the confessional. And we need to be clear that no human being can do that. It is God alone who admits us into the sacred. It is God who opens the doors. We can choose to enter or not, but the initiative always lies with the Lord - otherwise he would not be "The Lord."

And if the initiative lies with God, then the power of the sacraments does not lie in the faith of the recipient. Bread and wine will become the body and blood of Christ, not because of our faith, but because the Lord chooses to act in his way. We are born again in baptism not because of our faith but because of the power of God. If the presence of God in this world was dependent on the faith of Christians then there would be very little presence at all!

And the initiative lying with God reminds us of another key fact about sacraments: they may be doors to the sacred, but God can make other doors if He pleases. I believe that we are truly fed in this Eucharist with the body and blood of Christ - but God can choose to feed his people in other ways. I believe that in baptism I am born again and saved - but God can save his people in other ways. It is one thing to claim that the sacraments are doors to the sacred - it is another, and false, to claim that there are no other doors.

There is one other thing to say about sacraments. When Christ instituted the Eucharist he did not say,

say this in remembrance of me

but

do this...

The heart of a sacrament is not language but an experience - sensory experience. We see, hear, touch, smell, feel sacraments. It is rather like love. First of all we experience love. Later we may reflect on that experience, we may analyze it, we may theorize about it - but until we have experienced it the thinking is rather empty. So it is with the sacraments. As I talk to you today, my words only have meaning because I am speaking of that which you have already experienced.

N Clews  
2017

## **Holy Tuesday 2017** ***Baptism – Death and Resurrection***

I spoke yesterday about sacraments generally. I suggested that they may be seen as doors into the sacred: material signs with a spiritual reality.

Today I want to talk about one of those sacraments, the one that most of us experience before any of the others - baptism.

The material sign here is quite obviously a washing in water. Such a ritual exists in many instances other than Christian baptism. Sikhs do it. Jews do it. The prophet Ezekiel, several centuries before Jesus refers to such practices when he says

I will sprinkle clean water upon you and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness and from all your idols I will cleanse you

Ezekiel 36:25

In the time of Jesus, Jews would wash hands for purposes that went well beyond normal hygiene. Indeed, it is recorded in St Mark's Gospel that Jesus was critical of this excessive concern with outward things:

The Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him and they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with unclean hands, that is, without washing them. For the Pharisees and all the Jews keep the traditions of the elders and never eat without washing their arms as far the elbows and on returning from the market place they never eat without first sprinkling themselves.

Mark 7:5

Such ritual washing still exist. Moslems are very particular about washing before they worship - and it is the tradition for a priest before celebrating mass, to wash his hands with these words:

Lord, wash away my iniquity  
and cleanse me from my sins.

I once spoke these words aloud and was rather startled when the server who was holding the bowl replied "Pardon?"

The most famous washer in water was of course John the Baptist. He baptized Jesus and Jesus' disciples carried out their own baptisms. It is very tempting to present these baptisms as being the same as Christian baptism - indeed in preparing adults and children for confirmation I often ask them to compare modern baptism with that of John as if they were the same thing albeit with some superficial differences.

But they are not. The predominant image in pre Christian baptism is that of washing - washing away of sin. But in Christian baptism there is a new awareness of the power of water to give death and life. St Paul puts it like this to the church in Rome:

You cannot have forgotten that all of us when we were baptized into Christ Jesus, were baptized into his death So by our baptism into his death we were buried with him so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the father's glorious power, we too should begin living a new life

Romans 6:6

The power of water to take away life through drowning is obvious. But how can we forget that every one of is given life through water? The breaking of the waters is one of the first signs that birth is about to take place.

Paul put is like this to his protégé, Titus:

When the kindness and love of God our Saviour for mankind were revealed it was not because of any upright actions of ourselves; it was for no reason except his own faithful love that he saved us, by means of the cleansing water of rebirth and renewal in the Holy Spirit...

Titus 3:4

Nicodemus said,

How can someone who is already old be born ? Is it possible to go back into the womb and be born ?

Jesus replied,

I tell you in all truth, no-one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born through water and the Spirit/

John 3:5

This of course is the connection with Holy Week. Christian baptism was not possible until Jesus had died and rose again. You cannot be baptized into an event that has not taken place. We are, I think, quite familiar with the way in which the events of Good Friday and Easter have transformed the Passover into the Eucharist. Perhaps we underestimate the similar transformation from the baptism of John to the baptism of Jesus.

N Clews

11<sup>th</sup> April 2017

## **Holy Wednesday 2017**

### ***Baptism – The Gateway to Heaven***

Yesterday I tried to show that baptism is more than cleansing: it is about death and resurrection, dying to self and rising to new life. I quoted Jesus's saying to Nicodemus:

Nicodemus said, "How can someone who is already old be born? Is it possible to go back into the womb and be born ? Jesus replied, "I tell you in all truth, no-one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born through water and the Spirit"

John 3:5

Now this quite clearly suggests that being a Christian is not natural. We are not born Christians. We are not born with a full and untainted relationship with God. This is, of course expressed in a mythical way in the story of the fall. It is fascinating how fascinated psychologists are by the story of Adam and Eve. It clearly expresses a great truth that goes beyond time and religion.

The great attraction of the story of the fall is that it does not pin down exactly what it means. It leaves it very open to interpretation. And inevitably there have been very many people willing to fill in the intellectual gaps. The most famous of these was Augustine who developed a notion of original sin that seemed to hinge on sexuality. I am not quite sure that his theology has been helpful. But the notion that we are born in sin does seem quite proper. If sin is seen as being centred on self, then a baby is the most self-centred of all beings. A baby takes it for granted that all the other human beings around it will see to his every need. Part of becoming an adult is learning that mature human behaviour involves letting go of self and looking to the needs of others. And that is very hard. It is even harder when we have indulgent

parents who encourage their children to think that the world owes them a living.

But there is another way of looking at the matter of being born into sin. Over the last few years there has been a great fashion for corporate apologies. White Australians apologize to aboriginal Australians for their treatment of them two hundred years ago; Christians apologize to Jews; the Japanese apologize to British war veterans. And sometimes the apologies are not forthcoming. But there is no doubt that in so far as part my identity is British and Christian, then sinful things have been done in my name before I was born: Jews were murdered in Clifford's Tower in York, Asian and African people in the empire were turned into slaves or at best treated as second class citizens. And there is a sense in which I am implicated in that for the effects live on. A man born in Africa on the same day as me in 1957 would now be an old man, perhaps no longer well enough to work. A few years ago I used to take part in the committee meeting of USPG and sat next to a man whose name was George Sawyerr. He was fairly obviously of African origin, so the name Sawyerr was, I guess, the name of the slave trader who owned his great great great grandfather.

This, then is the sense in which we are conceived and born in sin. or as St John puts it

If we say that we have no sin we  
deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us

1 John 1:8

So in baptism we die and are born again; we put behind us this inheritance of sin. But over the centuries the practice of baptism has developed in two ways. First it has included children who are too young to answer for themselves. There is evidence of this practice in the Acts of the Apostles. It was confirmed at the Reformation when although a substantial minority wanted to return

to the original practice of believers baptism, the majority of Protestants were willing to affirm the practice of infant baptism. John Calvin claimed that it was of 'divine institution'.

But the second development is that in certain countries, infant baptism has become almost universal. Not only is there no decision by the person being baptized, but in effect no decision either by the parents and godparents. Soren Kirkegaard, writing of the Danish situation in the nineteenth century said "To be a Christian has become a thing of naught, something which everybody is, as a matter of course."

And inevitably there are those who oppose both developments. There are churches which restrict baptism to those who can confess their faith for themselves. This is often, rather inaccurately called adult baptism. There are individuals in the Church of England who believe the same. I think that those who press for the such policies are over reacting to the very lax baptism polices that have become normal in our society. There seems to me to be no case either in scripture or in church tradition for excluding children from the Christian community just because they are children.

There are also those who call for the baptism of children to be restricted to those whose parents or godparents have made a conscious decision to live a Christian life. I think those who press for this do have a point. I cannot see that decision can be taken out of the Christian life. I do not choose my nationality, my gender, my social class. But many aspects of my life, such as lifestyle, and spouse I do choose - and faith seems to belong to that class of activity.

If we return to the image of being born again it makes perfect sense. In order for birth to make sense it needs to be followed by nurture. In fact if parents did neglected their newly born children to the extent of not feeding them, not clothing them, not caring for

them in any way, then these children would and should be taken into care.

In fact all this is spelt out quite explicitly in the words of the Commission in the current service for the Baptism of children:

We have brought this child to baptism knowing that Jesus died and rose again for her and trusting in the promise that God hears and answers prayer.

We have prayed that in Jesus Christ she will know the forgiveness of her sins and the new life of the Spirit.

As she grows up, she will need the help and encouragement of the Christian community, so that she may learn to know God in public worship and private prayer, follow Jesus Christ in the life of faith, serve her neighbour after the example of Christ, and in due course come to confirmation.

As part of the Church of Christ, we all have a duty to support her by prayer, example and teaching.

The Commission goes on to say that the prime responsibility lies with the parents and godparents. But not the whole responsibility. The words are actually addressed to the whole congregation - to us.