

## Fourth Sunday after Easter 2020

The Prayer Book has some wonderful English expressions, as today's Epistle gives an example:

Wherefore lay apart all filthiness and *superfluity of naughtiness*, and receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls.

It always brings a smile to my face as I remember my choirboy days when we would snigger on hearing this epistle. The word "naughty" or "naughtiness" has a different meaning today than in the days of the King James Bible and the Prayer Book. In our time, we speak of naughty children as those who are mildly misbehaved or getting up to mischief, playing practical jokes and so forth. We will say sternly to a dog that has just chewed our favourite slippers "naughty boy (girl)". If we are overweight, our attention might be caught by an advertisement for sweet desserts with the words "naughty but nice". The word also has a smutty association with jokes about sex. It hasn't always had this mild and amusing meaning.

In older times, naughtiness meant true malice and wickedness. A modern translation of the pericope might read something like "excess of wickedness", which would not simply be smuttiness or a lewd notion of sexuality, but all the moral issues endemic in humanity throughout history. The sins of thought, word and deed are many. Some are committed through weakness, and others with full commitment of the will and knowledge of the seriousness.

All the same, the words evoke lewd levity and a certain joy in the Lord's House. At the same time we are to avoid sin which is often an excess of something that might not be intrinsically wrong in itself.

The Gospel is a continuation from last Sunday, from the sixteenth chapter of St John. It is full of theological meaning. The departure of Jesus is a condition for the coming of the Paraclete, the Comforter, the Holy Spirit. In last Sunday's Gospel, Jesus insisted

particularly on the suffering caused to us by separation. However, there would be a purpose in that suffering, like an expectant mother about to give birth. What is in store for us is a new form of life. *Souffrir passé, avoir souffert ne passe jamais*, to quote Léon Bloy again. That very same suffering will be turned into joy.

What is this new form of life? It will be an inner and spiritual life with God. Spiritual does not mean something that is abstract or unreal, but something that is more real than matter and the things of this world. No longer would we hear lessons on the Kingdom in parables, but in plain language. We must go inwards to our transcendent selves to find that Kingdom that is within. And that is more easily said than done. The Gospels of these three Sundays are like three panels of a triptych: the suffering caused by separation, an “exchange” of the physical Christ for the Holy Spirit, and a transition to new life.

Indeed, today marks a kind of “deal”: “It is expedient for you that I go away”, Jesus says, “for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you”. It is only by his departure that we will know the presence of God and the Holy Spirit. When Jesus was with the disciples, they would go on thinking that he had the mission of being a great teacher or liberator, a leader, a hero. Christ knew he had to go away so that his spiritual mission would be better understood.

When the Holy Spirit came, there would be a new spiritual relationship:

“When he is come he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgement: of sin, because they believe not on me; of righteousness, because I go to my Father, and ye see me no more; of judgement, because the prince of this world is judged”.

However, the way God would take issue with human sin and the powers of darkness would not be a worldly judgement in the way that judges and juries judge according to the law. “The prince of this world is judged” as darkness is judged by light. The coming of the Holy Spirit is the penultimate stage of the Mystery of Christ from his Incarnation.

It is at this stage that I would like to guide you towards a school of theological thought that has shone as a light in the twentieth century. I speak of the *Christliche Kultmysterium* of Dom Odo Casel of the Abbey of Maria Laach in Germany. There were many mystery schools in antiquity, and many of them showed characteristic extremely similar to Christianity, especially the theme of a God giving himself in sacrifice and rising from the dead. Christianity has often been accused of plagiarising these themes of deities like Horus. My interest in this world of mystery schools was awakened by reading Dom Odo Casel's *The Mystery of Christian Worship*. This German monk fought for the notion of Christianity being the perfect fulfilment of a long history of *types and shadows* in both Judaism and ancient Paganism. We perceive our faith as a *history of salvation*, a notion that is particularly strong in the Old Testament and the very notion of Tradition.

What is Christianity almost two thousand years since the death and disappearance from earth of Jesus Christ? Casel has the most convincing answer I know of. He brought us the word *mystery*, etymologically derived from both Greek and Latin. That is the heart of Christian faith, not a mere system of doctrinal facts and a code of moral conduct. This word *Mystery* is evident in the Epistles of Saint Paul – a deed by God, the working of the divine plan in eternity and its realisation in time, and which returns to God in eternity. As always, the traces of Gnosticism never left Christianity, and kept it alive.

The Mystery is the person of the Saviour and the Mystical Body which is the Church. This identification of the Church with the Mystery brings a new dimension after centuries of Bellarmine's materialist "perfect society" analogy. This Mystery is Christ's person, his incarnation, passion, death, resurrection, ascension and future coming. It is a whole and complete vision that does not reduce the liturgy to a sacrifice, but opens it to the wholeness of Christ. It is the very opposite from the narrow Nominalist mind of Protestantism and neo-scholasticism.

This view of the Mystery will give us a clearer view of what Christ meant that he had to go away so that something better could come to us. The heart of faith is not simply doctrine and teachings but the acts by which we are sanctified and saved. Our salvation, liberation from sin and union with God are brought about by participation in the saving

acts of Christ. This is not a system of morals or a doctrinal system, but the Mystery – God’s revelation to mankind through life-giving and salvific acts. The mystery by definition is hidden from the profane world and only open to believers.

It is a higher and deeper understanding of the notion of Tradition. The Mystery is not only a word, but also holy actions and deeds. Christ truly and really acts and works through the mysteries of worship and through the Sacraments. The Mystery, in Casel’s words is “*a sacred ritual action, in which a past redemptive deed is made present in the form of a specific rite; the worshipping community, by accomplishing this sacred rite, participates in the redemptive act and thus obtains salvation*”.

For Casel, this whole way of understanding the liturgy is summed up in the Secret Prayer of the 9<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost in the Roman missal:

*Grant us, we beseech thee, O Lord, that we may frequent these mysteries in a worthy way, for every time we celebrate the commemoration of this sacrifice, the work of our redemption is accomplished.*

The words in Latin convey the meaning even more strongly: *opus nostrae redemptionis exercetur*. This total identification is made possible by the liturgy.

Casel, as a Platonist, saw everything as a *whole*. All the sacramental rites and the Office are as much a place of the presence of the Mystery as the Eucharist. Casel’s notion of participation was the direct source of the *participatio actuosa* of Vatican II, the real participation of the faithful in the liturgy. But this was not a superficial idea of playing priests, handing out hosts, drawing attention to oneself and taking over the church. Participation is living the liturgy in such a way as each one of us can participate in Christ – it goes much deeper. It is *being* more than *doing*.

It is clear that Christ wanted his disciples to arrive at a higher view of spirit than the legalistic materialism of Judaism in his time. Much of Christianity in our days is just junk and a total misunderstanding. We can be thankful that Tradition has bequeathed something of the Church of the Fathers. The work is ours to do.