

17th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A

'The Treasure we have Found' 27th July 2014

Today's pastoral letter certainly gives us food for thought as we consider where we are after General Synod's decision to finally proceed with the introduction of women bishops, a process which is now going to be very rapid!

Today's liturgical theme is the 'Treasure we have found', Solomon prayed for the wisdom to discern the true value of things, for Matthew and the early Christian community the true value of things is summed up in Christ and his Kingdom, that Kingdom of Heaven, which is there right before our eyes but at the same time is like a treasure buried in the ground, waiting to be discovered and then once discovered, it is like a pearl of great price which we would give anything to possess.. For me the treasure I found was Jesus Christ as my personal saviour, a treasure that became more and more valuable over the years as I discovered the riches of the Catholic Faith as taught to me as a member of the Church of England, a Church which taught me of her historic claim to be part of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.

Sadly as the Church of England has relentlessly pursued a liberal agenda for the last 25 years or so, and I don't mean women priests or bishops necessarily, but a whole raft of issues - it has been increasingly difficult to maintain this claim with integrity, for central to the Church of England's self-understanding has been the Apostolic Faith and the tradition handed down to us, the cornerstone of which is the Apostolic ministry as we have received it; a 2000 year old ministry which was Our Lord's parting gift to the Church and that gives the Church life through her sacraments, especially the Eucharist.

It is not perhaps by chance that the Pastoral Letter we have received on behalf of a group we refer to as the Catholic Bishops in the Church of England, who align themselves with something called 'the Society', of which most of you will have heard, issued their letter on the day we commemorate John Keble, especially remembering that date, 14th July 1833, as the day he preached his famous Assize Sermon in Oxford and which marks the foundation of the Oxford Movement; a movement that has always been my inspiration and guide as a lay person and as a priest. It was the movement's rediscovery of the treasure the Church of England had nearly lost by the beginning of the 19th century, which spurred on that great anglo - catholic movement which led to the creation of parishes just like this one.

Turning back the pages of history to 1833, John Keble was fired with a mission to bring the Church of England back to an understanding of the true nature of the Church, a mission enthusiastically taken up by Newman, who in the first of the 'Tracts for the Times', asked 'on what grounds do you stand O presbyter of the Church of England?' A question just as relevant today as it was then. For Keble and Newman that ground was an understanding of the Church based on 'apostolic descent', described as 'a sacred gift' handed on from Bishop to Bishop. In the 19th century as much as in the 21st century, it is the apostolic ministry that is central and essential to any claim the Church of England may have to be part of the 'One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church' that we proclaim in the Creed.

If we change our understanding of this ministry we in reality are endangering the sacramental life of the Church, the Church's very lifeblood. If this is the case, then for traditionalists in the Church of England, this actually threatens our ultimate salvation, for we

could be cut off from the grace that flows from the sacraments. And If we cannot have sacramental assurance, then where does that leave us? Here we are at the very heart of the matter, and it is here that the catholicity of the Church resides and depends, what we call catholic order. And I am afraid this is where the difficulty lies with women bishops and the priests they will ordain. If all we think about is equality and a sense of justice being done then that's OK, but that has not and still is not the issue as far as priests like myself and Fr. John and many like us are concerned, we are not misogynists!

For Keble and Newman and for all in the Catholic Movement in the Church of England today, we know that if we want to claim to be part of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, then we must be bound by the faith of the Church and the tradition we have received. The General Synod's claim to have the authority to make the decision to change the nature and understanding of the Apostolic ministry is not one they can make. There is not time to go into the ecumenical implications of General Synod's decision, but I will tell you that the response from the Orthodox churches has been distinctly cold. Welcoming the outcome of the vote, one bishop speaks of synod 'liberating the Church from being locked into its past negative tradition and mind set.' He may well think that to be so, but for me that apostolic ministry, as we have received it is part of the treasure I keep safely guarded in my treasure chest, and is indeed one of its richest jewels!

Belief in being part of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church has always been my inspiration as a member of the Church of England; it is the treasure that I found as a sixth former and a student, a belief that means I have been able, with integrity, to remain an Anglican. Part of One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, a Church founded by Our Lord himself, upon the ministry of the first Apostles and believing the faith as taught by the Saints of old!

On what ground do you stand O presbyter of the Church of England?

Well for some of us we are still quite sure we stand on the same ground we have always stood! Yet with this dramatic change in church order how can we still remain? Why don't people like me go off and join the Ordinariate or go to St. Joseph's catholic church up the road? Keble urged faithful Anglicans to remain and not to either give in or give up! He said the surest way to uphold our endangered Church is 'to resign ourselves more thoroughly to God, in our piety, in our purity, in our charity and in our justice.' In 1833 he called upon his hearers to devote themselves to the 'cause of the Apostolical Church', even if they found 'very few who sympathise with them', urging them to look forward to the coming of the Kingdom, and that moment when Christ's victory over disorder and irreligion 'will be universal and eternal.' When that moment comes none of us will have to worry about the issue of women bishops or any other of the difficulties facing the Church of England or the wider Church.

Like Keble, our Bishops in their Pastoral Letter, urge us to remain faithful and not give up. God moves in mysterious ways and The General Synod has generously given traditionalists in the Church of England, priests and laity, the means to carry on as faithful Anglicans. It will now be for the Catholic Bishops and the Society to show us the way as we look forward, as they say, 'to a time of greater stability...when we can all focus, with renewed energy on proclaiming Jesus Christ as Lord, and on witnessing to Him as we serve our local communities and our nation. Amen to that!