

Praying on our Minds

Jesus College Oxford – Baptism and Confirmation

Sunday 25th May 2014

Apologetics Sermon Themes

Let me begin with a brief extract from David Lodge's novel, *Therapy*. The novel follows its hero (a television sitcom writer) accidentally meeting a lost sweetheart of his late teens on the *Camino*, the pilgrim route to Santiago in North West Spain. Here he is describing the Mass in the Cathedral which is the climax of the pilgrim's journey:

‘The high point of the service is the swinging of the *botafumeiro*, a gigantic censer, about the size of a sputnik, which is swung high into the roof of the cathedral, trailing clouds of holy smoke, by a team of six burly men pulling on an elaborate tackle of ropes and pulleys. If it ever broke loose at this mass it could wipe out the entire Spanish Royal Family and a large number of the country's cardinals and bishops’.

David Lodge is a cradle catholic and the Christian religion often impinges in his novels. His cameo here of the Mass at Santiago da Compostela is an affectionate piece of satire and it tells amongst other things of the extraordinary, the *sui generis*, the unique nature of *worship* – and here, of course, of Christian worship.

The scene he describes, I have experienced, but it puts me in mind also of another equally exotic occasion. I was working for the Archbishop of Canterbury as his sort of ‘Foreign Secretary.’ I was in Moscow attending to various tasks and this included the Orthodox liturgy in the *Patriarchal Cathedral*, one of many ‘cathedrals’ in the Russian capital. I was received by the celebrant, nothing less than a *Metropolitan* – better even than an Archbishop. I passed on the greetings of Robert Runcie, the then Archbishop of Canterbury.

The Metropolitan’s words of greeting have never left me: ‘Pass on my greetings to his grace – it is so good that you have come – you see the Church of England and the Holy Orthodox Church are the closest of any churches in the world’. Now after almost four hours of liturgy, with countless litanies and with incense clouds thick enough to compete with the legendary London smog, his greeting intrigued, even baffled me. It was only later on that the penny began to drop. It was not about the similarity of our rites. It was something far deeper that he had hinted at. For the Orthodox Church has no written canons of dogma; it has no index of doctrine; it has no codified set of beliefs. Instead it has a very rich and long tradition and it expresses its beliefs through its prayer and worship. Just the same thing is true of the Church of England and of the wider Anglican Communion.

In our case, it is the Book of Common Prayer finally promulgated in the Act of Uniformity in 1662 which is a key reference point. So when a deacon, priest or bishop moves to a new post, he or she is not asked to

sign up to a great list of doctrines, nor to a codified catechism. Instead the declaration says that the church ‘has borne witness to Christian truth in its historic formularies, The Thirty Nine Articles of Religion, The *Book of Common Prayer* and the Ordering of Bishops, Priests and Deacons.’ The reference is very largely to liturgy and to prayer. The classical description of this approach to the Christian faith is *lex orandi, lex credendi*: ‘the rule of prayer is the rule of faith.’ The Benedictine tradition simply says *orare est laborare*, prayer is work and it can be reversed, *work is prayer, laborare est orare*.

I began with two fairly exotic examples of worship, but in a way all worship is exotic. It is a unique and even essential part of our human experience. It is the defining feature of our Christian faith. When we worship God in Jesus Christ, then *we are the Church*. So as we worship we say and sing our faith. Charles and John Wesley wrote, between the two of them, six thousand hymns. For Methodists, hymns were part of that same pattern – Methodists sang and sing their faith.

In these past weeks you have looked at different ways in which we give reason for the faith which is in us. Worship is the classic pattern by which we do it. But there is an irony here. For in worship we participate in the *opus Dei*, in the very work of God. We offer ourselves to God. Worship has no utility – we do not do it for some other end. But the irony is that in doing it we act as missionaries for the gospel. It is just that Cecilia, Anna-Jane, Josef, Bun and Zoe are being welcomed here

today through baptism and confirmation. They are being incorporated into Christ himself.

Both our readings are intensely practical. Hannah praises God for the birth of her son, Samuel. Jesus, in an uncharacteristically didactic way (he usually uses story or parable) – Jesus teaches his followers to pray. Hannah in her song, which prefigures Mary's *Magnificat*, pours out her soul. It is an expression of her deepest being – it is worship. The 'Our Father', the Lord's Prayer - also rooted in ordinary life – in daily bread, in forgiving others, in responding to temptation, does the same.

Many years ago now, Michael Stancliffe, then Dean of Winchester, wrote:

‘..... if we do not meet together in our churches repeatedly, and if our services are not experienced as celebrations, whereby those taking part are helped to make contact with the source and ground of life and joy, with both the Alpha and the Omega of all existence and with each other, then we must not be surprised if, in the next generation, our choirs fall silent and our churches into ruin, and the nettles and the bats take over.’

These words were uttered over a generation ago and the bats and nettles remain at bay. For as Stancliffe suggests early on in that same piece, worship is an essential element within our life. Without it we die spiritually, for we allow God to slip out of our lives. Worship, as I began by showing is exotic, and unique but so is our humanity if it is permeated by God, the Alpha and the Omega of all existence.

Amen

READINGS

1Samuel 2:1-11

Luke 11: 1-10-