

**Christ Church Cathedral. Lent IV, 6 March 2016**

*'We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life....we believe in one holy, catholic and apostolic church'*

Those Anglicans among you of you who are old enough to remember using the Book of Common Prayer will remember that the Gospel for the day, the Fourth Sunday in Lent, was the Feeding of the Five Thousand; and so the day, in the middle of Lent, came to be known in some quarters as Refreshment Sunday; and the Church of Ireland lectionary for today allows for that. But you might also recall that the Epistle for the day, from Paul's letter to the Galatians, was totally unintelligible, but contained the one comprehensible phrase 'Jerusalem which is mother of us all', and so the day acquired the name 'Mothering Sunday' – though the real explanation might be that in mid-Lent in medieval times people went to visit their mothers in the next village and took with them - or expected to be greeted with – a Simnel cake. But the theologians got hold of this custom and made the Sunday into an occasion for celebrating Mother Church, transferring the epithet from Jerusalem. In a few minutes time when we say the Creed, we shall profess our belief in the Church, so perhaps for a few minutes we can think about our belief in the church.

Well, do we believe in the church? How willingly did you leap out of bed this morning to come here, and why do you come here? What do you think the church is for? The nearest Jesus gets to telling us to come

to church is his instruction at the Last Supper to ‘Do this in memory of me’ – and so we do. Paul says more – he tells his Corinthian converts off for mis-using the Lord’s Supper and even getting drunk at it (1 Cor.11-20-22, 27-29), which we don’t, and notoriously he says women should keep silence in church (1 Cor.11.34), and Paul lost that one. And James famously criticises the way class distinctions emerge at Christian worship, where the poor were told to stand there or sit there. Church-going had its problems from the start.

Nowadays perhaps we have different problems. This is an age of growing unbelief. How many of us have children who do not think the church has anything to offer? They tell us it is boring, or irrelevant, or redolent of an earlier world, outdated, intolerant of this present age, that its services comprise an uninspiring repetition of old formulas, and (a particularly cutting thrust) the church is divided in itself and its divisions hardly exemplify Christian love. We know ourselves that ecumenism can be more honoured in word than in practice; the heady ecumenism of the ’60s and ’70s seems to have faded.

It is of course very easy to criticise the church, whether from outside (understanding little of it), or from inside (perhaps feeling undervalued as one of its members). The Anglican Alec Vidler, then Dean of King’s College, Cambridge, a leader of those who would modernize the church, made this complaint in 1949 of church leaders: ‘Forgetting that the living Spirit of God is its guide and governor, the church allowed those men’ – they were all men in those days – ‘who were entrusted with the responsibility of leadership and government under the Spirit to acquire and wield unchecked forms of power which involved their setting themselves up in the Spirit’s place as lords over the church. This corrosion was the more subtle in that the

language of piety and the docile sentiments of the faithful could easily be exploited in the interest of the hierarchy's or the pope's will to power. Nor is it only popes and bishops who have lorded it over God's people, but priests and deacons and laymen too.' Notice that last phrase; we are all part and parcel of a very hierarchical church, even in the Church of Ireland where our government is strongly lay and synodical, and not limited to the hierarchic ranks of the ordained. I find it interesting that Vidler's criticism from 1949 is repeated almost exactly but in even stronger terms in a book by Fr Gabriel Daly, an 88 year old Augustinian, launched a few weeks ago in Dublin. (Perhaps we should remember that this cathedral was once an Augustinian abbey.)

Of course it is not for an Anglican in this place to present and parade Fr Daly's critique of his own church, but it is fair to say that his concern is the need for the church to be in a perpetual state of reform – reform, NOT mere 'renewal' to its original state – in order to meet the needs of the ever-changing world and cultural context in which it finds itself. He presses this need in two main areas: first, that of belief and theology; Christian belief cannot continue to be expressed in this century in language drawn from the Hellenistic philosophy of the fourth century – words like 'consubstantial' no longer have meaning for us; 'Catholic theologians are not bound to use ancient language about the Trinity in order to remain orthodox', he says (p. 167), and should not be chastised for expressing Christian belief in modern terms. And secondly, modern issues of life and behaviour, such as feminist concerns and recent discussions about Christian marriage and sexuality; here Daly argues that 'Insistence on rules and regulations at the expense of

understanding and compassion can be self-indulgent and arrogant....I believe that concern for the dignity or self-worth of any human being trumps legal and metaphysical considerations.' (pp.219, 225)

What Vidler and Daly say about authoritarianism, and about making important decisions on belief and practice on the basis of the cultural beliefs and practices of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries, applies to both Catholic and Protestant church communities, and to say 'I believe in the church' does not mean that we accept that our churches should be like that. Our churches must not be fossilised into either 1<sup>st</sup>- or 4<sup>th</sup>-century language, style, authority or practice; we are not here to be antiquarians, however tempting that is; we must not make idols of the 4<sup>th</sup>-century liturgy or the 14<sup>th</sup>-century Gothic church or even the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Evangelical church party or the High church party. We can't idolize either the Bible or the sacraments. We have to build on them and move on to meet the problems of our own age.

It is worth noticing that our Creeds start with our belief in the God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Belief in the church comes after that, and of course as the New Testament makes clear in the Acts of the Apostles, the church is, theologically speaking, the creation of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is what gives life, whether to creation as a whole or the church in particular. The church is a Christian community, with its family table, its presiding officers, its meetings, its established rules, and so on. But rules and officers and even a common meal by themselves do not make for a lively community. What is needed is inspiration, the work of the Holy Spirit.

I asked my wife what she thought the function of the church was. 'It's to inspire people', she said. Yes! Exactly. We come to this building each Sunday looking for inspiration. And if it gives us that, we won't find it too hard to get up to come here; and then perhaps others will join us.