

Wednesday in Holy Week 2018
Address given during Compline (Night Prayer)
at St Edmundsbury Cathedral
by the Right Reverend Tim Stevens

The cross in an anxious church.

"You have made God's law null and void out of regard for your tradition."

Those of you who may have visited the Taizé community in rural Burgundy in France will know that its genius is in bringing together young people from all over the world to join in the life and rhythms of prayer of the community for a week at a time. Many years ago, over the entrance to the door of the somewhat ramshackle extension to the church of the community there hung a sign which read: "Be reconciled all who enter here: parents and children, black and white, believers and those who cannot believe."

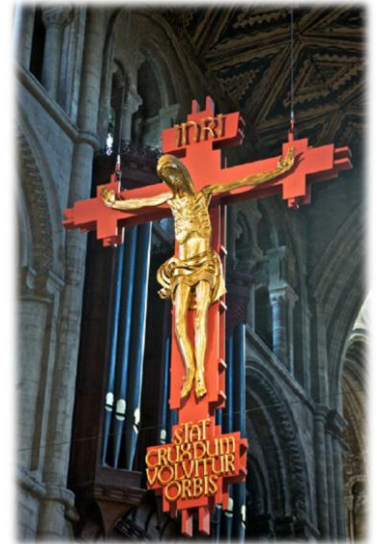
The founding prior, Brother Roger, insisted that there must not be any permanent physical features of the community, except for the church, and that the community should live from its own earnings. Above all that the young people who visited should be accepted and respected as they were and should have freedom to explore, to question and challenge each other's faith.

This evening we come across a group of religious leaders who would have found such an approach to faith dangerous or even blasphemous. St Matthew describes them as Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem. Their question relates to the regulations about hand washing before eating: it comes from a deep-seated mind set in the making of a simple but fatal distinction between the sacred and the secular. Their question reveals a world of assumptions about God and about how God deals with human beings.

For this religious mind set the world is essentially split between the pure and the impure, between the perfect and the imperfect. Such dualistic thinking takes them into a concern that the things of God must be protected and defended— that the impure will contaminate the pure, that cleanness is compromised by contact with the unclean and that health and fullness of life come by avoiding contamination.

It is a form of religious thinking to be found in all the great world faiths and is visibly present in some forms of contemporary Christianity. The history of the way religions develop usually moves from this first assumption towards the creation of an ethical code, which is policed by a hierarchy of some sort, and reinforced by rituals.

This week we are facing towards the image of the cross, reflected in the Crucifix [by Frank Roper, pictured] from Peterborough Cathedral on our service paper. The motto of the Carthusian order below the figure of Jesus reads “*the cross stands firm while the world turns.*” During these Holy Week evenings we have been exploring how the cross confronts the delusions with which we seek to find our way in the turbulence of a changing world. One such delusion is an imagined dualism between God’s world and the rest.



Jesus is executed by the religious leaders of his day precisely for confronting this dualistic view of the world and the church.

At the heart of his ministry is his habit of sitting at table with “sinners” – those who are seen as an identifiable group of social outcasts: people in one of the despised trades (such as tax collectors); those guilty of flagrant immorality (adulterers, prostitutes, idolaters,) all who failed to keep the law according to the standards of the religious authorities; and Samaritans and Gentiles.. All these had been placed, or had placed themselves, outside the holiness code of Israel.

So Jesus’s table fellowship with social outcasts was an acted parable of the dawning of the age of forgiveness. Jesus actively denied the equation of holiness with separation. He rejected the notion that external things defile or pollute a person’s essential being. It’s not contamination by unclean people that is the problem, but rather the attitude of the religious authorities themselves: “*Woe to you! For you are like unmarked graves, and people walk over them without realising it!*” he says.

Like the father watching for the Prodigal’s return, so God receives with joy even the most hardened sinner, he searches for those who have lost their way as a woman does for a misplaced coin. This strange God loves enemies, the ungrateful and the selfish, the good and the evil, the just and the unjust, in an all-inclusive embrace.

And this, of course, is why Jesus must be done away with. It is rituals of purity which keep people from different parts of society in their proper place. Without purity regulations, there would be a crisis of distinctions in which everyone, and everything, was the same: women equal to men, outsiders equal to insiders, the sacred no different to the profane. Gentile would be no different to Jew in the sight of God.

If the kingdom which Jesus comes to inaugurate is one in which the separations by which human beings lord it over each other are to be removed, then all such distinctions must evaporate. Indeed Jesus appears to go further than that. In contrast to the view of the authorities that uncleanness was contagious, Jesus seems to see wholeness as contagious. So he touches the leper, the unclean, women, and the sick, in order to heal without fear of infection or contamination.

And yet Jesus seems to go even further still than this. He appears to encourage the flouting of the law relating to the observance of the Sabbath, and he articulates a principle: “ *The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath, so the son of man is sovereign even over the Sabbath.*” He is establishing the principle that human beings who are made in the image and likeness of God are to be their own judges of what constitutes keeping the Sabbath holy.

All this is focussed in the story of the wedding feast at Cana: the waters reserved for the Jewish rites of purification symbolising the rules and regulations of organised religion are changed into the wine of the new order.

What had Jesus set loose by saying and doing these things? Surely it is the truth that a system based primarily on rules can be expropriated by desires for greed or domination and lead to enforcement which diminishes people, dehumanises outsiders, mandates a system of religious rituals which reinforce patriarchy and the power of the hierarchy.

Jesus profoundly understands that human beings are not machines which automatically respond to regulations with good behaviour. Rules are necessary but not enough. In two of the most significant stories told by Jesus in the gospels, it is compassion which transcends the formal requirements of religious dogma. It is compassion which leads the father of the prodigal to run to embrace his son even before the son has spoken of his contrition. It is compassion which moves the Good Samaritan to tend the victim in the street when the religious authorities have passed by through fear of ritual uncleanness. It is compassion therefore which transcends the obligations of the Law and which is the reliable route to wisdom and right judgements.

Compassion of course must begin with ourselves. Without it we cannot acknowledge with any honesty our own dark side and will spend our lives projecting it on to others. And this is what certain kinds of fundamentalist religion encourage us to do as we can see in so many of the world’s troubles.

It is why Jesus begins his ministry by going into the desert to face his own demons and to come to terms with his own inner world. It is the same pattern as we see in the lives of Thomas Aquinas and St Teresa of Avila. Without some form of honest and humble confession of our imperfections, none of us can or will face our own hypocrisy. And this needed work is indeed “spiritual warfare” as the desert monks called it, since it takes sustained struggles to be aware of our shadow self - which only takes ever more subtle disguises the holier you become.

How then does the Cross illuminate this for us? How in the cross do we see the way to growth and transformation for the Church? In watching Jesus’s way of dying we are seized by the conviction that the church is essentially a mystery – a mystery which we are called to inhabit.

Yet the radical nature of the vision of Jesus is almost impossible for us to sustain. We need rules, procedures and organisation if we are not to become lost and confused in the midst of life’s challenges.

But the cross brings us back to the essence of the church as the mystery of life with the crucified Christ rather than an organisation or a problem to be solved. For if we see it as a problem we shall become fixed on trying to find solutions to secure the future of the church on our own terms. That was the issue for the crowd at the foot of the cross: *"If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross – then we shall believe."* And precisely because he is the Son of God he hangs there and dies.

So this dying figure challenges our anxieties about the future of the church. It questions our delusion that the future can be secured by adopting the tools for organisational success. Such tools tend to reinforce the idea of a separation between the sacred and the secular and that it is the task of the church to manage that boundary.

When I was leaving Leicester after 16 years as bishop, I spent many days weeding and clearing documents, ring binders and box files of papers which had accumulated over those years. It was a salutary lesson in how much time and energy must go these days into managing and trying to solve organisational problems.

But I was reminded too that what was enduring was not the endless committee endeavour, but the unpredictable and unplannable moments when the fire and wind of the Spirit took us by surprise and of which there was very little evidence in all the documents I happily shredded!

If you have been watching the documentary about pilgrims on the road to Santiago, presently showing on TV you will have seen a group of people of different races, genders, sexuality and outlooks making their way together. Perhaps at time you have, like me, been irritated by their naivety, self consciousness or ignorance of the church. Some appear to have an orthodox faith, some not and some are questioners. Yet they are learning together as they walk. The boundaries between the insiders and the outsiders, the believers and the explorers seem to be blurring as they walk and talk.

Might this not be the Work of the Spirit as we see is people are being drawn closer together and closer to God? As we see the group rejoicing in its diversity, vulnerable, sometimes struggling, sometimes bursting with unexpected joy. As we see the group is aware of its failures, disappointments, doubts and differences and becoming increasingly honest about them as they travel. As the former life sentenced prisoner speaks openly of his struggles, as the lapsed catholic comes to terms with his damaging experiences of the church?

Is not this what the work of the Spirit looks like? Is this not the point of Christ being raised up on the cross in order to draw all people to himself? Is this not what the church essentially is as it finds itself embracing the full diversity of humanity and discovers Christ at the centre of it's life?

This community is not primarily a problem to be solved or an organisation to be managed. It is a mystery to be entered in which the crucified and risen Christ continually takes us by surprise.