

Sermon for the Assumption: Letchworth St. Alban and St. Henry VI 16th August 2008.

One way to separate the sheep from the goats is to separate those who regard Romans as the best, the greatest, the most important of St Paul's letters, from those who regard Ephesians as the best, the greatest, the most important of St Paul's letters. I am an Ephesians man myself, but even so I take my text from Romans 5.8: "While we were yet sinners Christ died for us".

Christ did not die for us because we repented of our sins, or even when we repented of our sins. Christ did not die for us because we had faith in Him, or even when we had faith in Him. Christ did not die for us because we were totally committed to Him, or even when we were totally committed to Him. Christ died for us because and when in the eternal purposes of the Triune Godhead He elected to do so.

The gentiles were not ready for Him. "He was in the world and the world was made by Him and the world knew Him not" (John 1.10). The Jews may have longed for His coming but they weren't ready for Him either. "He came unto his own and His own received Him not" (John 1.11).

He came, not in response to anybody's faith, but despite everybody's lack of faith. He died, not in response to anybody's faith, but despite everybody's lack of faith.

Theology therefore says that grace is prevenient, that God's grace goes before. Some don't care for speaking of grace as though it were an abstract noun and prefer to speak in more personal terms. Some prefer to say, "God acts first. Man can only respond. God initiates. Man replies".

Of course nobody can leave a present with us if we refuse to accept it. Not even God. The Father gives us Jesus to be our Saviour, but He can't be our Saviour if we refuse to accept Him.

Preachers frequently exhort us therefore to respond to God's love. They urge us to put our trust in Christ. They persuade us to repent. They encourage total commitment. They remind us that tokens and emotions are not enough. They say that if we really repent we shall amend our lives. If we claim to believe, why do we not do more for charity? If we claim to pray, why do we have racist tendencies?

In so preaching they follow the example of the Apostles. When Peter had finished his sermon on the day of Pentecost, his audience asked, "What must we do to be saved?" Peter urged faith in action, "Repent and be baptized" (Acts 2.37-38).

So from time to time there are attempts to renew the faith of a parish by having a mission. There are attempts to renew the faith of the wider church by new enthusiasms, such as catholic renewal, the liturgical movement, the charismatic movement, planned giving campaigns, ecumenical co-operations, cursillo, Alpha courses, Vatican II, reforms to the reform.

The danger of such preaching, of such renewal movements, is that we shall be corrupted. Well intentioned good causes can lead to error. Unless we are vigilant we could end up thinking things like, "Because I repent God loves me. Because I commit myself to Christ He redeems me. Because I have faith He saves me".

While we were yet sinners Christ died for us. The grace of God goes before, not only on Good Friday long ago, but daily in our own lives. If we repent, it is only because God moves us to do so. If we believe, it is only because God enables us to do so. If we commit ourselves, it is only because God leads us to do so. The Father not only gives us the gift of His Son, but also the faith by which to accept His Gift.

We are meeting for the Assumption. There are many reasons why we love the Mother. We love her because of her concern for right responses. "Behold the handmaid of the Lord. Be it unto me according to Thy word" (Luke 1.39). Her advice to servants at the wedding: " whatsoever He saith unto thee, do it" (John 2.6). In her own life she anticipated to some extent the perfect obedience of her perfect Son who prayed in Gethsemane, "Nevertheless not what I will but what Thou wilt" (Mark 14.36). The second century theologian Irenaeus tells that if Christ is the New or Second Adam, whose obedience cancels out the disobedience of the old or first Adam (Romans 5.15), then Mary is the new or second Eve whose obedience cancels out the disobedience of our first mother.

We love her because of the scandal of particularity. "This is none other but the house of God and this is the gate of heaven" (Genesis 28.17). The 9th century hymn puts it: "Thou was the gate of heaven's high Lord, The door through which the Light hath poured". (English Hymnal 215) This is the ark and throne of God, in which He travelled and from which He reigned. This is the burning bush. This is Mount Sinai, where man meets with God and still lives. John Donne, the 16th century dean of St Paul's, addresses her like this: "That All, which all everywhere is, yields Himself to lie in prison, in thy womb". And again: "Immensity cloistered in thy dear womb". "Verily, Thou art a God that hidest Thyself, O God of Israel" (Isaiah 45.15).

We love her because of our English word "lady". It derives from two Anglo Saxon words meaning to knead dough. A lady is one who kneads dough to provide bread for her family. Mary is twice a lady. She is lady to the Lord because she provided bread for Joseph and Jesus to eat. She is our Lady because she provides us with "The Bread of Life" (John 6.48), with "the Living Bread" (John 6.51). She is the loaf woman, the baker woman, who fed the family of man with that "Bread which came down from heaven" (John 6.50) that "man may eat thereof and never die" (John 6.50).

We love her because of her prophetic concern for the poor. "He hath put down the mighty from their seat and hath exalted the humble and meek" (Luke 1.52). *Magnificat* anticipates to some extent her Son's Sermon on the Mount.

There are many reasons why we love the Lady, who, precisely because she is the mother of Jesus, is our mother also. The 16th century German reformer and the 16th century Spanish mystic are agreed about this. Martin Luther: "Mary is the mother of Jesus and the mother of us all. All that He has must be ours. It is God's overflowing goodness that man should be honoured with such treasure. Mary is his mother. Christ is his Brother. And God is his Father." St John of the Cross: "Mine are the heavens and mine is the earth. The mother of God is mine. God Himself is mine and all for me because Christ is mine and all for me."

There are many reasons why we love the Mother. We love her because she is a living sign and symbol and proof of, because she is a living witness to, the prevenience of God's grace. Whenever we hear her mentioned, or see her pictured, that text from Romans may come to mind: "While we were yet sinners Christ died for us".

She grows greater and greater with child. She trudges down from Nazareth to Bethlehem. She journeys into Egypt. She dandles a Baby on her lap. She rears a Boy. Nobody knows. Nobody understands. Nobody believes. Nobody cares. There's no faith, no commitment, no response. But God is working His purpose out and her Childbearing is the beginning of our salvation.

While we were yet sinners - Annunciation. While we were yet sinners - Visitation. While we were yet sinners - Nativity. While we were yet sinners - Purification. While we were yet sinners - Jesus at the age of twelve in the temple. While we were yet sinners - the wedding in Cana. While we were yet sinners - Mary at the Cross. While we were yet sinners - Mary with the Twelve awaiting Pentecost.

While we were yet sinners - Christ died and revived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead and the living (Romans 14.9).

To Whom with His Father in the unity of Their Spirit be thanks for evermore. Amen.

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