

Thursday in Holy Week 2020 (A)

Summary: Life in ordinary

I hope you don't mind me cutting up the liturgy so that this sermon appears independently. I wanted you to be able to use this for your own devotions. Despite the Book of Common Prayer and the renewed western liturgy's insistence on a sermon at every Eucharist I've never had the same confidence that Karl Barth showed in believing that God waters your hearts through my words...

Theological preoccupations like that are a part of a priest's life, in much the same way as you have professional stuff going around your head, but sometimes it's good to take stock. You'd be amazed at how excited – not necessarily in a good way – clergy have got about recording or live-streaming the Eucharist. Can clergy act without people? Not according to the new rites but St Peter Damian, most of whose Letter 28, to Leo the hermit is a treatise on the use of "The Lord be with you", answering the query of certain solitaries, who wondered whether, when they celebrated the Eucharist alone, they should greet the stones and boards of their cells, or reply themselves to their own greeting...

Peter Damian was a reforming Benedictine monk who died in 1073 and who was placed in the highest level in the *Paradiso* by Dante – no greater recommendation! This the Doctor of the Church and Cardinal replied to such questions, "No, the priest is not alone. When he says Mass or prays, he has before him the whole Church mysteriously present and she it is whom he salutes by saying *Dominus vobiscum*. And since he represents the Church, she answers him through his own mouth, *Et cum spiritu tuo*." (St Peter Damian, *Dom. vob.*, c. 6, 10, etc.). Even if the priest is entirely alone, are they not, as St Augustine wrote, both a priest for the Christian people, and also themselves a Christian?

... and I do it because otherwise you'll not be able to say it! Archbishop Michael Ramsey speaks in the *Christian Priest Today* of the priest as someone who stands before God for the People and for the People before God. I know that the situation we are in is extraordinary and exceptional – and I long for us to be together again praising God. But in the meantime, what are we as the Body of Christ to say to the world in through our membership of the Body of Christ? I want to quote something Bishop David Hamid said this morning when the clergy of the Diocese met together, via Zoom, to renew their ordination promises.

So now new ecclesiological challenges are emerging - how can Church be Church without meeting, when we are alone, when we may have no access to our buildings, when we cannot assemble? Can the Church exist in a virtual world? These are questions for future theologians as they reflect on this period in the Church's history. But Christian leaders already recognise that the present crisis reveals what is at the heart of our calling as Church. The Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew said that "what is at stake is not our faith—it is the faithful. It is not Christ—it is our Christians. It is not the divine-man—but human beings." And Pope Francis said "we may have a duty to provide the sacraments, but we have a high moral duty to protect the common good and preserve the health of people". How paradoxical it is that one of the ways to protect the Body of Christ right now is by forbidding public worship, and avoiding physical contact with each other!

So this crisis helps our mission to become clearer: As Church we do not look after our own needs, but we work together with others for the Common Good of humanity. The Ecumenical Patriarch sums it up succinctly: "our apostolic priority is our neighbour". That the Church exists to serve those outside our fellowship and beyond our walls is something that we have always taught. But now this is underscored as we cut back on so much that is at the centre of our life in order to preserve the health of our neighbour. So our mission, our apostolic priority, is now in sharp focus. Maybe, even those who have been critical of the Church might now see, in the drastic safety measures we are taking, that we Christians are not as hostile to rational thinking as they might have assumed!

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So, my brothers and sisters, just as generations of Christians have done we're serving our neighbour in times of crisis but this time through our confinement.

But what are we say to them of tonight, such an ordinary night of food and friends and fellowship that suddenly went so horribly wrong? The singer Joan Osborne (no relation) asked the same question in her 1995 song 'What if God were one of us' and I've put a link in the online version of this sermon for you to enjoy.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Gx1Pv02w3Q>

*If God had a name what would it be?
And would you call it to his face?
If you were faced with him
In all his glory
What would you ask if you had just one question?*

**And yeah, yeah, God is great
Yeah, yeah, God is good
Yeah, yeah, yeah-yeah-yeah*

*What if God was one of us?
Just a slob like one of us
Just a stranger on the bus
Trying to make his way home*

*If God had a face what would it look like?
And would you want to see
If seeing meant that
you would have to believe
in things like heaven and in Jesus and the saints
and all the prophets (*)*

I love the honesty of the question. And the honesty of the response 'would you want to see, if seeing meant you would have to believe?'. In our confinement I would like to offer you this glimpse of the joy that is ours... in the words of the Bard, William Shakespeare.

*When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes
I all alone bewep my outcast state,
And trouble deaf heav'n with my bootless cries,
And look upon myself, and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featured like him, like him with friends possessed,
Desiring this man's art, and that man's scope,
With what I most enjoy contented least;
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
Haply I think on thee, and then my state,
Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate.
For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.*