

St Peter and St Paul, Evensong 2008

Ezekiel 34: 11-16

John 21: 15-22

Feed my sheep, Jesus asked Peter three times. Is this a model for ministry? If so, it's a model that seems under attack these days when clergy are encouraged to embrace the awful culture of corporate managerialism, to be managers, doubtless an MBA degree soon a necessary prerequisite for ordination in the CoE. And yet it's not right: curiously enough, it was a Baptist pastor who wrote "it is high time some ministers abandon delusory notions of themselves as senior managers or spiritual entrepreneurs and rediscovered the responsibilities of pastoral care, of the 'cure of souls.'" For people who work from bottom up, like me I hope, rather than top down, it can feel lonely.

This alone-ness, of flying in the face of what is expected of you, is something that must have been felt by all the early Christians at odds with the authorities, with their families (last week's gospel). But we need to stick to our guns, or try to. To be our true authentic selves, no airs and graces, and if ever there was a festival at which we are right to celebrate being ourselves, it's a Patronal. We are lucky here that Old Brampton Patronal is at this time of year, after the Ascension – that undersung festival on which we celebrate being human.

I'm a great fan of the Ascension. When I'm Archbishop of Canterbury I'll declare Ascension to be always on a Sunday so that its celebration is not just a matter of the faithful few fighting bravely against the attractions of Thursday evening shopping, or bookgroup, or pilates or whatever. It's a great festival because, like the Transfiguration, the Resurrection, it lifts our minds to what we're saved to – glory, radiance, joy—rather than concentrating, as Christians so often seem to, on gloom and guilt about what we're saved from.

The Ascension lifts our humanity to the Divine. There's nothing shameful about being a human being. If there were, why would the Ineffable God have taken the trouble—and what trouble—to become one? God in becoming Christ Jesus took on all our experience, and at the Ascension all this was incorporated into the Godhead, all our humanity, all human experience. All our warts. All our hurts—the signs of being human. The Christ who ascended to the Godhead was the wounded Christ – look at the east window – who had been lonely, forlorn, abandoned, the wounded healer, insulted, spat at, nailed, kicked, beaten, thirsty. Not some unreachable ideal. By his stripes, his wounds, we are healed—and it's through our brokenness, our woundedness, that we can act as channels of healing for others. We do not need to pretend to be what we are not—that's the sin of Adam and Eve in the garden where they tried to cover up who they were. We are plantigrade primates—that is, apes not archbishops. We need not pretend to be anything else. Don't put on airs. Don't put on church faces. Be yourself, and if the churchy hypocrites tell you off about it, give 'em short shrift. We know from the Gospel that Jesus didn't set entrance tests for his disciples: he took them as they were, warts and all. Yes, warts: **if we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.**

The Christ who ascended is not someone who knew nothing of our human experience, but someone who wept and toiled and mourned and died. And loved. Humanity with all its imperfections is divinized: 'God became man so that man might become divine'—the interpenetration of divine and human. Today is a festival of taking pleasure in being what we are: gathering up the past into the present, to be propelled into the future, starting from where we are—here and now. This message is also curiously relevant to me personally too. I'm just beginning to get a feel of what is expected of me in this job. I'm apprehensive for the future: will we get on, will I be adequate to your needs, will you allow me to fly or will you constrain me with 'that's not how we do it at Old Brampton'? Yes - I need to be fulfilled to if my ministry is to be effective.

This apprehension about the future arises at least in part because there is in each one of us a longing for something better. That's why we get lonely, feel let down: when our vision of how it could be doesn't match the reality. And I'm certain everyone has this hole within. Some people go to football matches to try to fill it. Some people long for chocolate. Some people go shopping. But everything fails to satisfy what has been called "a certain trace of silent sadness... a consciousness that results from knowledge of the vanity of all achievements and of the suffering of all life, not merely one's own." **A certain trace of silent sadness**—the God-shaped hole within—longing for God. Our souls are restless until they find their rest in thee.

Some of us call this the inclination to the divine. I think it's in our every cell, put there as a result of the divine-human exchange that took place in Mary's uterus as she nurtured the growing embryonic Lord within her. We are God's, we belong to God, we are of the divine, from the moment of creation. We need to let this urge for the divine, flower through prayer and meditation and worship—and enjoyment of life. Our response is to hearken to it: a word that carries with it a sense of listening, certainly, but also one of

acting in accordance with what we hear: aligning our will with the divine will. It's a difficult job amidst all the static we get from consumerism and the evils of advertising, but we bash on in hope.

Hope – Peter the apostle of hope – is why we need Patronal festivals: to rekindle, restore our sense of hope in a world where we hear and see too much of the nastiness of humanity, where we hear of people who ignore that longing for the divine, who shut it out who refuse to recognise its presence within them.

To end with, I hope these lovely words of two of my favourite writers will inspire and comfort us, and pull together some of the strands of this rather rambling sermon.

Hear what comfortable words St Irenaeus saith:

God the Logos became what we are, in order that we may become what he himself is. The glory of God is a living person and the life of man is the vision of God.

Hear also what Bishop Lancelot Andrewes saith on Christmas Day 1605

It is most kindly to take part with Him in that which He took part in with us, and that, to no other end, but that He might make the receiving of it by us a means whereby He might "dwell in us, and we in Him;" so we might become "partakers of the Divine nature."

Today we celebrate being ourselves – our true selves, and it is by being ourselves that we can approach the divine.