

B, Proper 11

I wonder what sort of image of God you have?

Perhaps Father, Inspirer, Creator, Comforter, Guide. Perhaps like David Jenkins, the former Bishop of Durham, God is a Disturber. God certainly has disturbed me, propelling me from one country to another and from one job to another. That's some disturbance.

Whatever image you have – and this is an interesting topic for another day – I suggest one more image this morning, that of a mischievous practical joker. And here's why.

For the last 30 years I have been accustomed to talking about bodily functions and organs in the most intimate and detailed manner you can imagine. My last teaching session to medical students about 4 weeks ago was all about what can go wrong during development with the genital organs of a baby boy, and you might think that becoming a member of the clergy would mean I'd leave all that behind. Not a bit of it. The first sermon I preach in Wirksworth church is on a day where in the epistle circumcision looms large. That either signifies a mischievous Rector arranging the rota, or a mischievous God. I will plump for the latter.

Paul uses circumcision of course as the mark of belonging to a tribe or ethnic group, and the point he makes is that the message of Jesus is that it does not matter whether you are circumcised or not – in the new creation, those days are over. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, male nor female, we are all one. What this says to us about openness to others and acceptance of others, and about welcoming others is material for another sermon, but I certainly want to mention it in passing today.

Thinking about this genital theme last week - Why hadn't I seen this earlier – I was stunned to realise just how comfortable the writers of Holy Scripture are about genital references, and they expected their readers also to be. Compare this with how prudish and voyeuristic and intolerant many people are today. We can learn a thing or two from Holy Scripture. And then I looked for other references in Holy Scripture to parts of the anatomy. There are millions. Skulls, hearts, limbs, bones, skin, bellies, bowels, internal organs. And we must not forget that Luke describes the son of God developing *εν γαστρι* in Mary's abdomen.

The whole point of Christianity is that God became human, like us. Incarnation. Enfleshment. Incarnation happened at the moment of Jesus' conception. The womb of Mary sustained the growing Son of God during Mary's pregnancy. The Bishop yesterday likened the church as the womb in which we mature in faith. The light of Christ growing inside us from the moment of our conception. All we have to do is cooperate with it and not prevent its shining out. Let your light so shine
We have been divinized by the incarnation.
All human bodily anatomy and physiology, too, are divinized, cleansed.

Now lest you think this is some crazy notion I am spouting, let me tell you that it comes in part from the implications of Holy Scripture (Proverbs, John), and partly from the early church teachings of the holy men of what is now Syria and Turkey. They have a lovely image, one to which I will return again and again because it is a favourite image of mine – that we are all created from God, we are bits of God. We all have God within us – and it is to God we mystically return in due course.

Cranmer: that we may live in him and he in us.

We all make up the mystical body of Christ.

And of course, we refresh ourselves, and remind ourselves in taking the Body of Christ in the Eucharist.

Today's gospel tells us that bodies are important. The sick sought healing through touch – Jesus' garment in this story, Jesus himself in other stories.

Touch is important. It is by touch that we are healed.

Touch is physical. We need not be ashamed of our physical nature.

Remember that we perceive God, through our physical sense organs

We Hear God: listening for God, listening to music that moves and tells us of God

We See God: in others, in art and beauty that reveals God through creativity.

We feel the presence of God: low notes of a cathedral organ, the rhythmic beat, the touch of others, the touch of God's creation

We smell and taste the presence of God: the creativity of good food and wine – a very Dominican idea!

All this is prayer. We pray with our bodies as well as our minds. The grace and beauty of the athlete is a revelation of God. It is prayer if directed God-wards as much as singing hymns. We worship with our bodies as well as our minds. Look at the athleticism of Muslims at prayer, kneeling, prostration, standing. We could do with more of that physicality of worship and prayer.

Worship through dancing: why not? Some make the sign of the cross, physical touches.

We perform these physical acts in worship not *because* we believe but *so that we might* believe.

The third theme I want to draw out of the readings today is the Master's instruction to his tired and hard-pressed disciples to recharge their batteries by going into a solitary place.

We need to take such breaks

To think about God and us

To talk about God and us

To do things about God and us

To listen to God

To reconnect with the divine spark within, with the light of Christ within.

Such retreats are not to shun the physical world but rather to fortify ourselves the better to engage refreshed with the physical world.

The first great commandment demands that we love God with all our heart and mind and soul and strength

ἰσχυος

The Greek word means more than just strength, but wholeness and integrity of bodily function

To do this we need to look after ourselves in body and mind.

You might think this is selfish

But it is not at all. The second great commandment to love our neighbour as ourselves demands that we first love ourselves. It does not say we must love our neighbour better than ourselves. It makes me angry to see how so often the message that comes across from church people is perverted in an attempt to manipulate us into feeling guilty.

Aeroplane oxygen masks – get yourself sorted out before helping others.

The fact is that we are no use to anyone, and certainly not to God, unless we are in good form ourselves. We have a Christian duty to take care of ourselves.

We have a Christian duty to seek adequate rest and recuperation: would that the captains of industry who insist on making slaves of their workforce would heed this.

More about this – wing it for a few seconds.

So here are the three messages of my first sermon in Wirksworth parish church.

Do not be ashamed of the biology you carry around with you

use it to glorify the creator God as well as you can given the ravages of time and infirmity permit. Rejoice in it, and the creativity, grace and joy it brings.

And remember that you have a Christian duty to look after yourself, to rest, and to allow others to rest.

Jesus the Christ was fully human – that is part of our faith.

We most approach his example when we too are fully and gloriously and authentically human.

Amen