

Revd Michael Burns
Christ Church West Wimbledon
Sermon : June 6th, 2021
“Pentecost”

1ST SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY 2021

Well, the excitement of Easter and Pentecost is finally over for another year – and the Church now gets on with the everyday task of working and living the Christian faith.

In today’s Gospel reading, Mark outlines a difficult encounter. Jesus’ popularity is beginning to cause anxiety among the religious authorities, who try to discredit his ministry by suggesting that he is working in partnership with Satan. But Jesus is clearly a match for them and skilfully unravels their accusations. It is by the Holy Spirit that healing and transformation happen in the lives of the people and denying the great works of the Spirit is, in his eyes, unforgiveable. Then we read that Jesus’ close family are waiting outside with some understandable anxiety. Jesus, in perhaps a somewhat terse and tactless way, calls into question those relationships – pointing to his new family made up of those who remain close, faithfully following him and doing God’s will. We probably know what he meant, but perhaps he could have put it with a touch more tact and diplomacy; though to be fair to Jesus, this is Mark who is reporting the encounter. Mark who is well known for his very fast and succinct writing style.

Today many people will speak of their ‘church family’ – not to undermine the existence of their natural family but to stress that those with whom they meet and worship regularly are like a family. They are there for support and care and offer prayer – particularly in times of stress and need. *What binds us together is the same spirit of faith*, as Paul puts it. Our post communion prayer prays that *our communion may strengthen us in faith, build us up in hope and make us grow in love*. Our church family is important to us – but of course we know it is a family that is always changing and growing – it is not a closed group but

always open to welcome in new people. It was WB Yeats who said *“there are no strangers here; only friends we haven't yet met”*.

Nevertheless, at times there is frustration and exasperation with an unwieldy family such as the Church of England! Here are the headlines from a recent meeting of the House of Bishops:

The Chief Operating Officer of the National Church Institutions gave a brief update regarding the new national Register of Clergy and discussed updated proposals relating to the Clergy Conduct Measure.

The Bishop of London addressed the House in her capacity as the Chair of the Next Steps Group.

The Bishop of Sheffield addressed the House in his capacity as Chair of the Mutuality in Finances Group.

The Archbishop of York addressed the House with an update on progress of the Vision and Strategy workstream.

The Bishop of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich addressed the House on the Transforming Effectiveness workstream.

Now sorry if you think I am being disloyal – but I have no idea what it all means either!

But despite everything, in Paul's words in verse 16, *“we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day”*. And that is the point. It is what is inside us that matters. It is by keeping to God's law of love and walking in the ways of wisdom that we may find true life in Jesus Christ.

At times I may feel personal exasperation with the Church of England – but that doesn't mean that I feel exasperation with God – quite the opposite. At times of exasperation with the C of E, I go back in my mind's eye to the Sea of Galilee – and remember the call of the disciples by Jesus – encapsulated in that wonderful hymn that was sung last week, with its profoundly moving words *“Dear Lord and Father of mankind. Forgive our foolish ways. Reclothe us in our rightful mind, in purer lives thy service find, in deeper reverence praise”*. And *“Take from our souls the strain and stress and let our ordered lives confess the beauty of thy peace”*.

Today I would encourage us all to hold on to the things of our faith that speak to us. Remember why and how you became a Christian – if you indeed you know. It may have been something that someone said or did that spoke to you. It may be that you have not known anything else and that faith has always just been there in your life. It may have been an image or a picture that led to faith and to God.

For me there are two things I want to share with you this morning. Firstly, a cross. When I was a teenager and beginning to explore my faith and the possibility of ordination, I purchased a beautiful but simple crucifix – the image in French bronze of a very young Jesus. That has been at the heart of my daily prayer life ever since. Secondly, a picture: it's the famous painting by Salvador Dali of the Sacrament of the Last Supper. It speaks to me for a whole host of reasons: the bread and wine on the table being blessed very simply by Jesus, pointing to his own body; the beautiful background of the Sea of Galilee; the image of God with no face but with his hands spread out and holding everything together.

Both remind me of the foundation of my Christian faith and take me back to the start. In doing that, I can then manage to cope with all that is thrown at hard-pressed clergy and lay people too, by the organisation that the Church of England has now become! *“In simple trust like theirs who heard beside the Syrian sea the gracious calling of the Lord; let us, like them without a word, rise up and follow thee.”* Amen.