

Sermon 5th Sunday of Easter 2024 The Priest Pastor

On the 30th Anniversary of Priesthood.

Many philosophers and writers from Socrates to Bob Dylan have commented that the older we get, the less we know.

Despite the amassing of experience and knowledge, somehow we are left with more questions,

We realise we know very little at all.

It is one of the many paradoxes of life.

We work hard to achieve financial security, education, worldly success, outward things, but eventually we realise that the most important thing in life is the heart in relationship, with our own inner self, community, friends, family, and the divine.

And those crucial relationships cannot be forced by striving to exercise control, but by being, by allowing, by attending.

We see the great paradox of the human heart; so evident today, capable of terrible evil and cruelty, and yet also capable of heroism, of selfless love, of great creative power, of saintliness.

Life is paradox – and to live,

we have to balance the paradoxical nature of it all.

One of the reasons I think Christianity is true is because it is like life, so full of paradox.

For example it holds together these two tremendous truths.

Firstly, that God is transcendent and unknowable.

God is beyond human understanding, and our attempts to limit him with our theology will always stumble. God is even, rather fashionably, beyond gender. The original, traditional Lords Prayer, which addresses God 'which art in heaven' is on to something.

The words we use to describe God are a shorthand for that which cannot be described. God is a 'mysterium tremendum'.

Holding that in one hand, the opposite is also true.

We *can* come to some understanding of the transcendent by seeing what is perfect in this life, as a pointer to the divine.

So we *can* say God is love, God is beauty, God is truth.

And God *exhibits* that, *reveals* that in Jesus Christ.

The eternal takes on our flesh and creates a new way, the ultimate way, to lay hold on what cannot be held.

Through words, love, healing, pain, blood, tears, bread, wine, water and oil, God comes to us and inhabits our world of paradox.

Jesus is both priest and sacrifice. Both master and servant.

He calls us. He *woos* us. A Mysterium Fascinosum.

When I look at the Apse of this magnificent church, with its new artwork, I see both. Christ on the cross, the panoply of the Church, saints and angels whose worship we participate in this morning.

The traditions of the Christian religion

And under the feet of the risen Christ is what is described as the 'sea of glass' from the Book of Revelation.

But art says different things to different people.

For me, that piece speaks of mystery, the mystery of the universe, and the mystery of the Spirit of God, dynamic, impossible to contain.

Constantly moving, creating, transforming.

Religion and spirituality. The two are not separate but together part of the great paradox.

Human beings are built for structure and ritual
alongside a recognition and a yearning
for that which is numinous, other, beyond. We need both.
We are offered both.

The account we heard from Acts of Phillip and the Ethiopian Eunuch,
travelling the wilderness road from Jerusalem to Gaza is rather
beautiful. It says much about how a seeker after the mystery that is God
found what he was looking for through relationship.

An apparently random encounter.

But Phillip was obedient to the guidance of the spirit.

Through his priestly task, the sacrament of baptism took place,
and a life was transformed. Baptism was the ritual
that transformed this man, excluded from the temple
by not being 'wholly' male. In Christ, he was welcomed, accepted,
and called. He went on his way rejoicing, and, by tradition,
took the gospel to Ethiopia, a place that has given rise to deep faith,
amazing art, extraordinary architecture, and contemporary martyrs.

I remember at the age of 11 knowing nothing really
about the Christian faith, one day having a powerful experience
of something, someone beyond. I was compelled to raise my arms
in thankfulness, to whom or what I did not know.

I had no idea at the time that this action would be something
that I would be called to do for the rest of my life
or even that gender would be an issue.

But there were many angels along the wilderness road,
as the Ethiopian found, who gave guidance and support.
(some of those angels are here today).

And the calling to what was then impossible was fulfilled.

30 years as a priest has been an adventure
in which the gracious purposes of God have unfolded,

apparently randomly, usually surprisingly. I am filled with gratitude for his patience with my weakness and inadequacy.

As today's hymn puts it so graphically
'fear not to enter his courts in the slenderness
of the poor wealth thou wouldst reckon as thine.
Truth in its beauty and love in its tenderness,
these are the offerings to lay on his shrine'.

God is there in the unknowing, the mystery, but for me primarily in the people I have the honour of praying, laughing, weeping, dancing, singing, talking, listening, anointing and breaking bread with. At those times of baptism, marriage, and in commending unto eternity. Christ in the exchange between persons.

There's a prayer that we use at our healing eucharists here at St Marylebone that speaks of a God
'by whom we are called to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, and by paths as yet untrodden.'

The call for all of us is to continue our pilgrimage along that wilderness road; at times we will be the seeker, at others the bringer of good news. And as we travel we will hold together both the immanence and the transcendence of God, that eternal mystery whose name is love.