

Come clean

6 6 10

O God,
the strength of all those who put their trust in you,
mercifully accept our prayers
and because through weakness of our mortal nature
we can do no good without you,
grant us the help of your grace,
that in keeping your commandments
we may please you both in word and deed.

My text may be found in our gospel portion for today from St Luke:

‘He came forward and touched the bier.’ (7 v14)

Have you ever touched a dead body? I was with my mum when she died. Once the soul departs, the corpse seems to take up less space than a person’s body did: it is as if what animates us, when gone, leaves us diminished. In Judaism, to touch a corpse would have rendered you ritually impure. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, such a thought might have been the reason why the Priest and the Levite refuse to stop to help the unconscious traveller on the roadside somewhere between Jericho and Jerusalem.

Cleanliness is the focus of today’s sermon. ‘Coming clean’, being clean in the sight of God is the first of a series of sermons I want to preach which centres on

our service of Holy Communion. One criticism voiced of Christianity is that it is a too hard religion to understand: it's just too complicated our critics allege. I don't believe such criticism is true but just in case, I want to preach a series of sermons to make sure what we do in our service is perfectly clear to you.

In this morning's passage, unique to Luke's gospel, Jesus restores the son of the Widow of Nain to life. Neither are named, the mother nor the boy, but Jesus has compassion on the widow, left alone, and gives her back a living son. As such, it is one of three miracles in which Jesus restores the dead to life, prefiguring his own resurrection. The extraordinary thing here is Jesus touches the bier on which the boy's corpse is lying and by so doing, as I said, he is risking ritual impurity.

It is this thought, that we are unclean, dirty, that is addressed by the opening part of our communion service. We are preparing to meet God. God is by definition pure, holy, clean. We, by our very nature, have a tendency to get dirty, literally and spiritually, so we need to prepare ourselves to meet God.

St Bartholomew's is part of the Church of England, the Anglican Communion. But we're not a church in England but a church in France. In England, I'd encourage you to spend more time before the service to sit quietly, to be prayerful, to prepare yourselves to meet God in the service. But here in France, people can invest considerable time and effort and money travelling a long way to get here for the service and when eventually they do arrive, understandably they want to touch base with folk they may well have not seen since the last time either came to church. The buzz and excitement and warmth of the conversation before

church is a good thing and I am loath to try to discourage it. Besides, like King Canute, I doubt I could even if I wanted to!

So we start with a moment's silence after the notices then having sung our first hymn, the first prayer prepares us for worship – it's called the Collect for Purity and that's precisely what it is – a call to be pure. The key sentiment that underlies the prayer is how well God knows us, probably better than we know ourselves. He is aware of our inmost thoughts and there can be no secrets from him. So in this first prayer, we are asking God to prepare us in heart and mind for the service ahead by the presence of the Holy Spirit in us. Just as we breathe in oxygen to be able to live, so too we are breathing in the Holy Spirit to be able to worship.

Then we have the general confession – general because we are not being specific about what we have done wrong, only that we have done wrong in what we have thought, what we have said, and what we have done. And that just about covers it. Confession is simply identifying what we have done wrong, expressing regret for what has been done wrong and promising to try to do better in future. And the Absolution follows: the forgiveness of sins, the washing away of guilt. It is pronounced by me, your priest, but it's not me absolving your sins. I pronounce God's absolution to you – I am merely the mouthpiece doing God's will by articulating the forgiveness which God wants to show to us all.

So in this first sermon, we can say that the purpose of the opening of the service to prepare us for worship. The Collect for Purity puts us in the right mind to

worship. The Confession and Absolution put us in the right state to worship. Thus purified, we are now ready to hear the word of God; to speak to God in prayer; to share in the bread and the wine, his body and his blood; to be blessed; and finally to be sent back out into the everyday world. But more of that in the weeks to come.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's Dinard

6th June, 2010

H: Sermon 22: Come clean

