

Sermon SS Cornelius & Cyprian; The Society for the Maintenance of the Faith

*John 17: 14 They are not of the world any more than I am of the world...
18 As you sent me into the world, I sent them into the world.*

SS Cornelius and Cyprian were both martyrs, but they are linked together because of their correspondence on the nature of the Church. Ecclesiology is suddenly the issue of the moment. As someone said to me the other day, how refreshing that people are standing for General Synod on issues other than sex. The issue our saints were considering was the nature of the primacy of Peter, and the seniority of the Bishop of Rome. Later centuries have viewed the correspondence through the prism of later debates, but it seems that the African Bishop Cyprian may have begun with a more ‘modern’ and ‘western’ view of the authority of the successor of Peter over all the churches, and later developed a view that all local bishops share that authority and preside from the Chair of Peter for the local Church.

Our own ecclesiological angst focusses on the parish. Whatever the source of our issues, every Christian has a concern with the Church. Christ has sent us into the world; and that means that we have been divinely ordered for the work Christ has sent us to undertake. Our structures and institutions matter, for the Church is the Body of Christ immanent in human society. Yet He has said that we are not of the world any more than He is of the world. The divine purpose leads us to see that the messy life of the Church militant here in earth is one with the Church revealed in the vision of the spotless Bride of Christ perfect in all things.

Cornelius and Cyprian discussed how the Church on earth should best be ordered and behave. If someone lapsed under persecution, how easy should it be to come back into the communion of the Faithful? Cornelius said it should be possible after reasonable repentance. His opponent Novatian said it should be jolly hard. It was probably a good thing that the argument was not played out on Twitter, but Cornelius won, and was confirmed as Bishop of Rome. Cyprian meanwhile was criticised for deciding when persecution came to Carthage that that the African Church was best served by him going into hiding. Both were grappling with practical issues of how the Church which has been sent into the world should respond to politics and persecution. But at one and the same time they were not of the world. Both our saints were ready to face martyrdom, and both suffered in this world for the glory that is set before us.

The great gift of our parish system is not the system itself but the three great things it delivers in the world that show that the Church is not of the world.

A parish for every community reflects the transcendent truth that Christ has come for all.

Our parishes are a means of transfer of resources, so that the Church is not only where she can locally afford to be, but the good news is preached to the poor.

And, in our own society, the parish enables those who never come to church to feel that in some sense they have a part of it whether that be through civic engagement, community activity, heritage and historical interest or recognition of the leadership which in some senses we are still able to offer, so that in some small ways the Father’s will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

But we must also recognise that no one church can do everything, whatever the parish profiles pretend. Even the busiest church with the widest range of activities will miss out on some of those it might reach. We do need things like chaplaincies and, yes fresh expressions and church plants seeking to serve specific interest groups and cultures with culturally competent Apt Liturgy. At its best that what all this mixed ecology stuff means.

Both the parts of the Church which are parochial and those that are not can fall into the trap of allowing some aspect of the worldly work of the Church to be conflated with the Church and thought of as enough. The Church of God is not a human institution to sustain for centuries; nor is she a private interest club of similar people who are drawn together by a common interest, as Fresh Expressions often are; nor is she a social club with hymns, as parish churches too often become. Both are rightly criticized by Lord William's observation that a strong church is one in which you meet people with whom you would never otherwise associate.

As Patrons, your role is to place clergy in parishes. I remember being told by a wise priest as I arrived in Tottenham to remember that however much time I spent in the church 'it will never be yours in the way that it is theirs.' And that is right; the parish priest and the Leader of the BMO comes from elsewhere. In this he imitates Christ who was sent into the world, and is a sign that the people are called away from their community and into the Body of Christ. But his living in the community and life as part of it incarnates the paradox that the work of the church which is not of this world builds the local community so that

ultimately one does not leave the community to enter heaven, but it has become heaven, a place no longer focussed on itself but on the Lord, so that to remain there is to have gone to Him.

Which is what happens in martyrdom. Focussed on heaven, the martyr is never more engaged in the world, as he participates by blood in the sacrifice of Christ. I when I am lifted up, said the Lord, will draw all people to myself, and it is when Christ Crucified is the centre of our world, that at last it finds its purpose and meaning. So the Church is most divine when she is sent into the world to take the physical things of everyday life, bread and wine, and offer them to be transformed into the material stuff of flesh and blood, by which we share in the things of heaven. In the end it comes back to the Altar. Whether it is a parish church or a chaplaincy or a plant it is here that we who have been sent into the world feed the world so that we may come to Christ, and know that we are no more of the world than He is.

To these things therefore let us now turn.