

Jesus an Embarrassment
A Sermon for the Sunday After Ascension
Ezekiel 36 vv 24-28, Acts 1 vv 15-26, John 17 vv 6-19

After His Resurrection, Jesus told His disciples to preach the Gospel to the whole world, to tell people to become disciples and to baptize all those who believed in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. It was, however, an embarrassment to be a Christian and an embarrassment to talk to people about Christ. Jesus Himself was an executed criminal. The Romans regarded crucifixion as a degrading death. The Jews thought that anyone hung on a tree was cursed. To the authorities – both Jewish and Roman – Jesus was a trouble maker and a rabble rouser. He was not a formally educated man. He did not come from an important family. To gentiles, He was a despised Jew. To Jews, He was a man who had misled the people.

You might get away with saying that He had been misunderstood, that His execution was a miscarriage of justice, that His attainments belied His humble background. Unfortunately, even if you did that, you could not get away from the fact that part of your task as a Christian was to bear witness to the Resurrection. You had to tell people that God had raised Jesus from the dead. An awful lot of people would think you must be bonkers. The dead are dead. Whatever happens to us when we die, we don't get up out of our graves three days after the funeral! If you tell people that Jesus rose from the dead they are going to think you are either lying or deranged.

It gets worse. Christianity begins as a kind of Jewish sect. As a Christian you inherit the Hebrew Bible. Quite early on, the Church will decide that the mission includes gentiles and that gentiles do not have to be circumcised or to observe much of the Law. Your Jewish brothers and sisters will think of you as disloyal to the religion of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. When the Romans besiege the city of Jerusalem in 70AD, the Christians will remember the prophecies of Jesus and escape out into the country. The Jews who stay and fight and are defeated will see the Christians as traitors.

Out in the gentile world, the embarrassment is the opposite. Cultured gentiles see the Hebrew Bible as crude, the product of an uncivilised, uneducated, barbaric race. The God of the Old Testament is portrayed in vivid and passionate language, very different from the measured tones of the philosophers in their descriptions of the impassible first cause of everything. Even the Greek translations of the Old Testament and the language of the Gospels and of much of what we know as the New Testament is unrefined, the language of the market place rather than the academy. Classically educated people looked down on the language of Matthew, Mark and John. They did so in nineteenth century England, let alone second century Athens.

There were lots of reasons for the masses to dislike Christianity. In the Roman Empire, sexual license was the rule. Christians preached chastity and celibacy. Public entertainment was blood-thirsty and lewd. Christians declined to go to the arena or the theatre. Loyalty to the state was expressed by a willingness to worship the emperor as *Lord and God*. Christians declined to do this. In a world governed by political intrigue and military might,

Christians set standards of honesty, proclaimed peace and insisted that the meek would inherit the earth.

As more and more people became Christians and the pagan shrines were abandoned, the remaining pagans blamed the Church for every military reverse, plague or crop failure. These disasters were seen as the pagan gods' way of expressing their anger at the neglect of their cult.

Sunday was just like any other day in the Roman Empire at least until C4. Taking part in the Sunday Eucharist meant taking some trouble, getting up before work, refusing to accommodate friends and family members who were not Christians and could not understand why you wanted to go to Church. In times of persecution attending Church carried the risk of martyrdom. You had to put up with gross misunderstandings and calumnies when people accused the Christians of cannibalism because they ate the flesh and drank the blood of their founder.

Moreover, belonging to a group of people who preached love and forgiveness and the highest standards of behaviour, you opened yourself to charges of hypocrisy whenever you, as an individual, or the institutional Church, as a whole failed, to practise what it preached.

It was hard for the better educated to become Christians, to understand their faith and to proclaim it to their fellows. In many ways, Christianity went against everything they had learned at their equivalent of school and college. The philosophers had come to understand God as the supreme being, eternal, unchangeable, unaffected by anything. He or It could not in any way be linked to this corrupt earth. Different schools of philosophy proposed ways in which you could order your life, living by principles which would bring you satisfaction. The traditional religion of Greece and Rome was viewed as a collection of elegant myths for the enlightenment of the human race. It was very hard to see how this God of the philosophers could be the Creator of this sinful world, still less that He could be involved in human history as He is portrayed as being in the Old Testament, still less that He could take flesh, become one of us and die a gruesome death. Christian intellectuals had to work very hard to understand this for themselves and to explain it to fellow thinkers.

So long as one paid lip service to the cult of the emperor and kept one's religion private, cultured Romans were quite tolerant of a range of religious ideas. Christians would appear uncultured and intolerant by contrast. At a time when the Emperor was a Christian, the pagan senator Symmachus asked for the pagan altar of Victory to be restored in the Senate House. He argued, "What difference does it make by what method a person searches for the truth? There is no one single path that leads to so great a mystery." The court went along with Symmachus. Bishop Ambrose opposed him. It all sounds very modern.

Indeed it all sounds very modern, which is why I am preaching this sermon. People today don't see Jesus as anything very special. They don't believe He was the Son of God. They deny the Resurrection. They might say they honour His teaching, but they are pretty selective about the bits of it they follow. His warnings against wealth, power, hypocrisy,

marital infidelity and self-centredness are about as popular as His exaltation of poverty and humility and His invitation to take up the Cross and follow Him.

The Bible is written off as a collection of ancient myths and not particularly edifying ones at that, crude and difficult to understand. The masses see Christians as killjoys because we worry about sexual immorality, drunkenness, gambling and consumer debt. We are seen as busybodies if we say that society should live by Christian standards. Sunday is once again an ordinary day and we are not supposed to regard attendance at Church as a duty which transcends our obligations to family, work or leisure. Our education system treats all religions as equal, which means that it does not teach any one of them as something people should live by. Religion again is something people are expected to practise in private if at all and tolerance and the nurturing of diversity is official public policy. It is quite difficult for a young person growing up in modern Britain to be a practising Christian. The education system and the media are biased in favour of an uncommitted multiculturalism. Peer pressure is to enjoy yourself without too much regard to morality. It is quite difficult to believe what Jesus teaches when hardly anyone else seems to and actually to practise your religion in public would make you stand out like a sore thumb, a vague threat to those who know deep down inside that the contemporary secular way of life is ultimately unsatisfying and unsustainable, but who do not want to accept the discipline of becoming Christ's disciples.

So why did the early Church bother in the face of all this embarrassment and is there any reason why we should bother?

The rapidly growing Christian movement could have allowed the embarrassing memory of the crucified carpenter to fade away. Paul might have been a better bet for a founder – an educated man, a great traveller and writer, fluent in Greek. But Paul insisted that he did not preach himself, but Christ crucified. Jesus and the Cross are vital to the message, even if they are a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Greeks.

The resurrection could have been played down. Instead of saying *Christ is risen*, Christians could have said that His Spirit lives on in the hearts of His followers, but they didn't. Paul spoke for us all when he insisted that *if Christ be not raised, your faith is in vain*. Christians have to believe in and to proclaim the Resurrection.

Some early Christians thought they could ditch those parts of the Bible which are unsavoury to contemporary culture, hard to understand and difficult to relate to our own conceptions of God and Christ. A character called Marcion wanted to prune the Bible down to the Gospel of Luke and a few of Paul's letters. The Church, as a whole, however, did not. The Church recognised the worth of the Old Testament and of all the books which we include in the New Testament. Christians wrestled and struggled to understand what they meant, but they knew that these books were uniquely inspired and that they had to inform our concept of God and Jesus.

It would have been easy to give up the chore of meeting every Sunday for the Eucharist – especially in times of persecution. After all, they could reason, you can pray anywhere

because God is everywhere. You don't have to go to Church. Even in those early days worship sometimes fell far short of the love feast it is meant to be. You could feel closer to God in the countryside. Yet the early Christians stuck with what they were told in the Epistle to the Hebrews: *Not forsaking the assembling of yourselves together, as the manner of some is.* If previous generations of Christians had given up going to Church and just worshipped as individuals at home, do you think there would still be a Church for us to go to or, indeed, to stay away from?

It would have been easy in the name of toleration and the desire to fit in to compromise on emperor worship, chastity, gladiatorial combat, wealth, intrigue, power and all the vices of the Roman Empire. The Church would have appeared more relevant and therefore better placed for mission. Of course, individual Christians often did compromise. Sometimes the institutional Church went along with sub-Christian or even non-Christian practices. But, deep down inside, Christians always knew that they had to live by the precepts set forth in Scripture and to preach that way of life to the world. Often so-doing would lead to unpopularity and sometimes it would lead to martyrdom, but Christians knew that it was their God-given vocation to uphold His standard of perfect love.

Christians could have retreated in the face of intellectual opposition. They could have refused to engage with the philosophers. Instead, they recognised that the great pagan philosophers had apprehended something of God. They could have accepted the philosophers' God – divine perfection entirely remote from the world of flesh and blood, but they knew that they must not because *the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.* And that, too, was incredibly difficult to understand. How could Jesus be both man and God? It would have been so easy to decide that He was one or the other, but He has to be both if He is our Saviour, if He really reconciles man to God. So Christian intellectuals wrestled to understand and to uphold the truth even when their struggles divided the Church and earned them the mockery of unbelievers.

Why? Why? Why? Why not compromise with the world they lived in, find a comfortable accommodation with contemporary culture? Because, for all the embarrassment, all the doubt, all the confusion, the things that are hard to understand, the obloquy and mockery, the persecution, for all that, there is a power in the Gospel which demands our best effort to comprehend and to proclaim. As St Paul says, "The love of Christ constraineth us." There really is no choice. We have to wrestle with God – like Jacob at the Jabbok. We have to cling on to the God we begin to know, to commit our lives into His Hands and to proclaim the Gospel to the world.

I learned a new word last week. It is *anagogy*. What *anagogy* is is the process by which we are led upwards into God by God's divine activity working in us. I expect *anagogy* will be the topic of another sermon, but this fact, our being led up by God into God, is the reason that we must overcome the embarrassment and whatever else holds us back from believing God, worshipping God and proclaiming God in the world. It wasn't long before they knew that the crucified carpenter in fact encapsulated God and humanity. We cannot let go of that, no matter what.