

Caritas – A Sermon for Quinquagesima

II Kings 2 vv 1-12 p369, II Corinthians 4 vv 3-6 p1160, Mark 9 vv 2-9 p1012

For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake.

I intend to end today's sermon with the Prayer Book Collect for Quinquagesima. Basically, it is a prayer for Christian love and that is why it is one of my favourite collects. It is ironic, therefore, that it is so easy to use it as an example of the way controversy and division can infiltrate the fellowship of the Church.

Even calling this Sunday *Quinquagesima* is not without controversy. Some people say that we shouldn't use traditional words which are hard to pronounce and difficult to understand. We are told that they put off children and newcomers. In *Common Worship* this Sunday is prosaically called *The Sunday Next Before Lent*, still a bit of a mouthful, but at least it is clear what it means. On the other hand if you revel in words as I do, and indeed many children do, the word *Quinquagesima* is quite fun to use. Knowing words like *Quinquagesima* is a mark of belonging. It shows that you are a member of an organisation when you use its language. Belonging is a good thing. On the other hand, however, any mark of belonging is also a mark of who doesn't belong. When we do our funny little Anglican things like call this Sunday *Quinquagesima*, suddenly shake hands with everybody 2/3 of the way through the service, bow to the altar or respond *And also with you*, whenever anyone says, *The Lord be with you*, we mark out who is at home with us and who is not. Of course, if we are Christians, we do not want those who do not belong to feel excluded, certainly not excluded by our funny little ways, but we do want people who belong to know definitely that they do belong. A Church ought to be a close fellowship, but never a closed fellowship, but I am not sure how we achieve that. The more we insist that our members are totally committed to the Church they belong to, the more we seem to exclude those who are not yet prepared to sing with absolute sincerity:

Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.

On the other hand, if we downplay the need for commitment and keep our boundaries porous, people just drift in and out according to their whims and never commit to Jesus and we have a feeble Church which is unable to fulfil its purpose.

Just to stir things a bit more before we leave the subject of the name *Quinquagesima*, I am sure that there are some Christians who define themselves as the sort of Christians who call this Sunday *The Sunday Next Before Lent* as against those who call it *Quinquagesima* and *vice versa*.

The next bit of controversy concerns the use of the 1662 Book of Common Prayer. A lot of people will tell you that it is because the Church is so traditional and even old fashioned that we are regarded as irrelevant in the modern world. If we want to bring in new people and especially young people, they argue, we have to forget about the old prayer book, old hymns and ancient translations of the Bible. We need to demonstrate our relevance by using modern words and modern music in our worship and in the way we proclaim the Gospel.

Other people will tell you that the truth is quite the opposite. They point out that church going in this country started to decline rapidly at just the time the Church brought in all these new forms of service, new hymns and new translations of the Bible. The Authorised Version, the Book of Common Prayer and Hymns Ancient and Modern unrevised were very much part of English culture even as late as the 1960s. It was changing these things, some say, that alienated the English people from the Church of England.

We cannot know which is right because we do not know what would have happened if we had not made these changes forty or fifty years ago. There is no real comparison. If you look outside the Church of England at other denominations and other countries, you get a mixed message. The Orthodox Church seems to have remained strong, despite not having changed its forms of service very much in fifteen hundred years, whereas there are plenty of fast-growing Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches which use no traditional prayers (except the Lord's Prayer) and mostly modern music – though some of them do still seem to have a fondness for the King James Bible of 1611.

When you do look at the Church of England, again you find a mixed picture. Some very traditional churches flourish. What I guess is a larger number of modern evangelical and charismatic churches also flourish. A lot of middle of the road churches languish. My suspicion is that, it is not so much what you do, as how whole-heartedly you do it that makes the difference. It is certainly not simply an age thing. I get some older people grumbling that we have far too few modern hymns. On the other hand, the one actual example we were given at Bognor of a teenage fellowship which had grown rapidly from one to about thirty was a group of Goths who meet regularly for a 1662 Communion service in a candle lit mediaeval church at midnight!

If we are traditional, we can be accused of unnecessarily putting off the current generation. If we abandon our traditions, we risk losing the insights the Church has gained as a Spirit-filled community, living out the Gospel in an enormous variety of cultures for 2,000 years.

If you join me in saying that there is value in the traditional and in the modern, that there is a place for basic teaching and a place for deeper study, then I would ask you how we find enough places for all that when we only meet all together like this four times a month?

Just to stir things a bit more before we leave the subject of modernisation, here is yet another perspective I found in a journal. In the 1960s we did everything right. We put the services into modern English. We introduced new hymns and better translations of the Bible. Lay people were encouraged to participate a great deal more both in public worship and in Church life generally. Christians were asked to make the huge commitment of weekly Communion, instead of merely attending Mattins. The fact that numbers then dropped was not a bad thing. Too many people had been complacently enjoying beautiful rituals they did not really understand without making much of a commitment to God. Now it was all made clear, they were challenged either to commit or to walk away. It was only to be expected that many would walk away, just like the people in the Gospel who walk away from Jesus when they realise how much He is asking of them.

Today we have received wonderful visions of the glory of God in the ascension of Elijah, the Transfiguration of Jesus and the picture of the God *who commanded the light to shine out of darkness who hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ*. It is astonishing that differences of opinion about worship provoke such terrible rows in churches. It is possible for good people to hold sincerely a variety of views for such good reasons as we have considered above. If we think of all these different people as different parts of the Body of Christ and respect them as such, we can use one another's insights to build the Body. What a tragedy it is, however, when Christian people are divided from God and from one another by the bitterness of their disputes over holy things.

My final bit of controversy concerns the fact that this collect uses the word *charity*, for the New Testament Greek *αγαπη*. Some people will tell you that most people today think of collecting tins if anyone mentions *charity*. They would insist that we always use the alternative translation *love*. Other people object that the English word *love* or *lurve* does not mean entirely the same thing as the Greek word *αγαπη*. Most people think of romance when they think of love. Some Christians would caution against raising complex questions of theology and meaning in an ordinary parish church. If we use hard words and introduce difficult ideas we can be accused of putting off children and newcomers and upsetting people's simple faith. On the other hand, if we dumb everything down, we can give the impression that faith is for children and adults who have never grown up and we fail to give mature Christians the tools they need as they relate their faith to the opportunities and challenges of their every day lives in the complex modern world.

So let me try. What does the Bible mean by *αγαπη*? According to Paul, *αγαπη* suffereth long and is kind, *αγαπη* envieth not; *αγαπη* vaunteth not itself; is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil, rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; beareth all things, believeth all things, endureth all things. *Αγαπη* never faileth. Of faith, hope and *αγαπη*, the greatest is *αγαπη*. So all those things which *αγαπη* is, are what we ought to be. According to John, *God is αγαπη* and it is because *God so αγαπηd the world that He gave His only-begotten Son to the end that all that believe in Him should not perish but have everlasting life*. No human word is sufficient to say what God is, why He does what He does and what we are if we truly live in Him and He in us. The New Testament tried to express this greatest of all virtues with the Greek word *αγαπη*. We inadequately translate *αγαπη* as *charity* or *love*. It is charity or love, *αγαπη*, which defines the Church, our relationship to God, our relationships with one another, our outreach to the world. Today we have received wonderful visions of the glory of God. The glory of God is *αγαπη*.

O Lord, who hast taught us that all our doings without charity are nothing worth; Send thy Holy Ghost, and pour into our hearts that most excellent gift of charity, the very bond of peace and of all virtues, without which whosoever liveth is counted dead before thee: Grant this for thine only Son Jesus Christ's sake. Amen.