

*The Good Spirit of God and the scoundrel spirit*

It is a very intense, emotional scene that we find in our reading from John 16 this morning. Jesus is in the upper room in Jerusalem with his disciples. All is dark and candles flicker, casting shadows upon the walls. Jesus is fully aware that Judas, the betrayer has already slipped out into the night and he knows these are his last hours with his beloved friends. He knows that he will shortly be arrested and tried and executed, and he faces therefore all the pain of immanent separation. What do you say to people from who you are about to be parted, people you love deeply? What do you leave with them? The temptation of course is to try to say too much, to say everything. Well, Jesus does not fall into that trap. As he says in our passage, 'There is much more that I could say to you, but the burden would be too great for you now.' In other words, you're in no state to handle it all now. But then comes this promise, 'However when the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth.' You don't need to know everything now – the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth, will come upon you and guide and direct you.

Well, Jesus is certainly placing a huge responsibility on the Holy Spirit. This Jesus movement that he has begun depends entirely upon this promised Spirit for survival. And last week we celebrated the Day of Pentecost when the Spirit came and transformed this little group of followers, and the Book of the Acts of the Apostles recounts the extraordinary effects of the Spirit as it drove them out into the ancient world, turning it upside down and inside out. And perhaps we see something of the power of that Spirit in the fact that within a few centuries the church had become a great power in the world. From an upper room in Jerusalem to palaces and riches and power – that is the story of the Christian church in the centuries that followed Jesus' death and resurrection. And maybe we see there displayed the extraordinary dynamism of the Spirit of God – the Spirit of God by whose power creation is fashioned, the Spirit of God by whom Jesus is raised from the dead, and the Spirit of God by whom Christian church is launched upon the world and in due course

sails, majestic, upon the tides of history. Maybe there we see Christ's promise of the Spirit realised.

Or maybe not. You see, the assumption here is that the church that came after Jesus was what Jesus intended. We see Jesus up there in the upper room, this little movement as fragile and flickering as the candle-light, and then we see the great emergence of the church in due course, and we presume that it is the Spirit of God that has guided from one to the other. We assume that this was all part of the plan. But things have not always been seen that way. And in recent years especially that account has been challenged. As one theologian famously put it at the turn of the last century, 'Jesus preached the kingdom, and what arrived was the church'. According to this scenario, Jesus was a kind of charismatic preacher who believed that God was about to break into the world. The kingdom of God, the rule of God, was about to burst upon the earth, and all the evil and injustice and pain and suffering would be banished and there would be a reign of peace. And Jesus called people to prepare for this, to get ready. And he went to the cross believing this was immanent. But he was wrong. The kingdom of God never came and what happened instead was the church. Jesus died and what rose from his grave was this organisation, this church which was an attempt to build something out of the ashes of Jesus' movement. It was an attempt to build an institution upon Christ's tomb. And of course in this account – and there are various versions of it - there is a huge discrepancy between what Jesus was all about and the church that we got lumbered with. And if it is true that Jesus and the church are in opposition to one another like this then the promise we find in John 16 did not come true. 'When the Spirit of truth comes he will guide you into all truth' – well, the Spirit didn't! In the centuries that followed that night in the upper room what happened was a violation of the truth, a distorting of Jesus' message. And it has to be said that there is something quite appealing about setting the church and Jesus against one another like this. After all, here was this simple Galilean rabbi with his radical message of peace and love and inclusion, this Jesus who shunned possessions and who looked to the birds of the air and the lilies of the field - and there is the church in all its power and prestige, its pomp and its ceremony and its crimes and its all a betrayal of Christ's simple message. And it is very popular to

contrast these two today in a society that celebrates ‘spirituality’ but which is suspicious of institutions and has grown sick anyway of the church’s wretched misdemeanours.

Perhaps the best-known portrayal of the distortion of Jesus’ message comes in Dostoyevsky’s classic book *The Brothers Karamazov*. The scene is the Spanish city of Seville during the Inquisition and Christ has returned and has been recognised and welcomed by the people, and now he has been arrested and the Grand Inquisitor visits Christ in his cell and informs him that the next day he is going to put him to death. The Grand Inquisitor’s reasons for doing this are straightforward. Jesus’ teaching is too radical, too demanding for people. The Grand Inquisitor takes Jesus back to the devil’s temptations in the wilderness and he points out that the reason Jesus rejected them was because he wanted people to be truly free, and yielding to the devil, turning stones into bread and the other temptations would have coerced and manipulated people into following him. The problem however, says The Inquisitor, is that people cannot stand too much freedom. They need coercion and control. They want the illusion of freedom but deep down they cannot cope with it. And so they need the church. They need this great institution to rule their lives, to tell them what to think. The Grand Inquisitor himself is an atheist but he recognises that the teachings of the church make people happy and give them hope and they need all that and it is good for humanity to be united under this one great banner. And so the church follows what the Inquisitor calls ‘the wise spirit, the dread spirit of death and destruction’ – a far cry from Jesus’ Spirit of truth. People cannot cope with what Jesus offered and prefer the illusions of the church. And so Christ, the true Christ, goes to his death the next day while the wise, false, dread spirit lives on in the church and in its leaders.

The same basic idea has been revived in recent weeks with the publication of Philip Pullman’s brilliant and beautiful new book, ‘The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ’ from which we heard an extract earlier. In the book there are twin brothers – one called Jesus and one called Christ, and Jesus is the charismatic, gifted one who draws the crowds with his message that God’s Kingdom is coming soon. And Christ is the one who recognises Jesus’ potential, what he could achieve – but only if he plays his

cards right. And again, as with Dostoyevsky, there is a scene in the wilderness where Christ is actually the tempter wanting Jesus to found a church, an institution that will unite the world. ‘I can see it so clearly, Jesus!’ says Christ. I can see the whole world united in the kingdom of the faithful – think of that!’ But Jesus will have none of it. And later in the book Jesus gives vent to a scathing tirade against all the abuses of religion and the church, and in it you can hear all the anger of the atheist Pullman, and so much of what he says is true. And I won’t give away too much but at the end, in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus wrestles with a God he no longer believes in and again we hear the voice of Pullman himself in this plea by Jesus: ‘Lord, if I thought you were listening, I’d pray for this above all: that any church set up in your name should remain poor, and powerless, and modest. That it should wield no authority except that of love. That it should never cast anyone out. That it should own no property and make no laws. That it should not condemn, but only forgive. That it should be not like a palace with marble walls and polished floors, and guards standing at the door, but like a tree with its root deep in the soil, that shelters every kind of bird and beast and gives blossom in spring and shade in the hot sun and fruit in due season...’ and so on. And do we not sense the Spirit of truth in those words of that atheist?

So what are we to say? Did Jesus’ promise fail? Did the Spirit come and guide Jesus’ disciples into all truth, or not? Well, we need to at least recognise the terrible reality of that other spirit. We might call it after Pullman ‘the scoundrel spirit’ that has bedevilled the church and that Dostoyevsky spoke of. We need to recognise its awful reality. But that, however, is not the whole story. You see, from one point of view yes, the church is a human creation, a human construction, built in a spirit of fear and oppression and its crimes and horrors are legion. But there is another reality, a creation of the Holy Spirit, that has never been entirely eclipsed, thank God.

Let me put it this way. Today is Trinity Sunday, when we celebrate the enduring mystery of God who is One God and yet three, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And while we stammer to speak of such things there are certain features of the Trinity that we discern. In the Holy Trinity we discern a free-flowing communion of love between Father, Son and Spirit; in the Holy Trinity we

discern a joyful interweaving of three persons in what has been described as a kind of dance; in the Holy Trinity we discern a kind of mutual self-giving and delight that lies at the very heart of God. And the church is a creation of that God, that Trinity, that communion of love and joy and self-giving. The church may be a human construction and frequently a fearful and oppressive one. But it is not just that. It is also an outpouring of this triune God who has come among us in Jesus Christ, and who has reached out and gathered us together in the Holy Spirit and even lifted us up to share in God's own divine life. And there are times, there are moments when God's inner divine life finds expression amongst us by the power of the Spirit and the church becomes the very body of Christ in the world and for that reason it is worth sticking with. And the Spirit of God will forever be at war with that other scoundrel spirit. And the church as God's joyful creation will forever be in conflict with the church as an oppressive human construction.

We need to recognise that tension. And let us pray that as we face the problems of decline and as the church loses its power and authority that we may be ever more open to the Spirit Jesus promised and so led into truth. And let us look to the Holy Trinity, that eternal communion bound together in love and joy and yet open to embrace the world, and let pray that it may take shape amongst us here and now. Amen.