

Holy Week 2012, Coventry Cathedral

Matter matters.

‘The whole earth is full of his glory!’ (Is.6.3)

I remember John Ebdon, a well-known broadcaster in the 60s and 70s, telling me the story of when he was on a train travelling through beautiful English countryside which was bathed in glorious pink evening sunlight. He was so entranced by the beauty of the scene that he couldn't help himself from exclaiming to his fellow passenger sitting opposite on the train *‘Isn't that just incredible?’* To which his fellow passenger looking at the window responded *‘It certainly is, British Rail can't have cleaned the windows for months.’* One saw only the dust. One saw the glory through the dust. As Herbert put it *‘A man that looks on glass/On it may stay his eye/ Or, if he pleaseth, through it pass/ And then the heav'n espy.’* Vincent van Gogh glimpsing the glory of God all around him in God's creation writes to Theo, his older brother, *‘We must admire more, most people don't admire enough.’* By this he means ‘wonder at’ God's creation. There is a wonderful Stanley Spencer picture of Christ on his hands and knees gazing in rapt attention at the daisies on the ground before him. It is entitled *Consider the lilies. ‘The earth is charged with the grandeur of God,’* writes Hopkins, there is *‘a dearest freshness deep down things’*. When Isaiah experiences the numinous glory of God in the Temple, he sees and hears seraphim singing God's glory. *‘Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty, the whole earth is full of his glory.’* (Is.6.3) Moses encountered the radiance of God shining out through a bush in the Sinai desert, aflame with the glory of God. The uncreated light and fire of the glory of God is glimpsed in and through his creation. God says to him *‘Take off your shoes for the ground on which you stand is holy ground.’* (Ex.3.5) Elizabeth Browning writes: *‘Earth is crammed with heaven and every bush on fire with God. But only he who sees takes off his shoes.’* William Temple famously shocked some when he declared *‘Christianity is the most materialistic of all religions.’* By this he meant that matter matters to God. Matter has an eternal destiny. It is not only the water of baptism or the oil of anointing or the bread and wine of Holy Communion that God uses to bring grace and healing, the world itself is sacramental. Having considerable Celtic blood in my veins, I like to think, as many scholars actually do, that if the Celtic church had won the day at the Synod of Whitby instead of the Roman church the division between ‘spirit’ and matter would not have grown as deep as it has in western Christianity. And yet, again and again we spiritualise the Gospel as if the Word was not made flesh (*sarx* – denoting the ‘earthen vessels’ or *‘jars of clay’* as Paul describes our brittle humanity) but as if the Word was made words or ideas or spiritual entities. The Word was made *flesh*, fully, tangibly, palpably human. *‘That which we have heard, that which we have seen with our eyes and our hands have touched – this we proclaim concerning the Word of Life.’* (1 John 1.1) As C.S. Lewis put it *‘There is no use trying to be more spiritual than God. God never meant us to be purely spiritual. That is why he uses material things to put new life into us. We may think this crude and unspiritual. God does not. He invented eating. He likes matter. He invented it.’* (Perelandra). We can go further. He not only invented it. He became it. John of Damascus, refuting the iconoclasts, wrote *‘I do not worship matter, I worship the Creator of matter, who for my sake became matter and deigned to dwell in matter, who accomplished my salvation through matter.’* (Second Apology: On Divine Images 14.)

As human beings children of Adam, we are with Adam ‘hewn from the dust’. We are *creatures* and part of God's creation. So our worship as Christians is not that which sets us apart from the earth and God's creation and creatures, it is what unites us with it. Sadly we have largely let go of the

Benedicite in worship which was always a reminder that we but share in the praise of God with all God's creatures and creation itself. But of course many of the Psalms invoke and celebrate the praise of all creation. Psalm 148 is a case in point: '*Praise him, sun and moon, praise him all shining stars, ... praise him sea creatures and ocean depths, lightning, hail, snow and clouds, wild animals, flying birds...*' and so on. '*All that you have made will praise you*' proclaims Ps.145. The great saints, among them Francis of Assisi in the West and Seraphim of Sarov in the East, saw clearly the embrace of God transfiguring all his creatures and creation at home as they were with all God's creatures even the most wild and savage. This indeed is Isaiah's vision of God's new creation where '*the wolf shall lie down with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the goat and the calf and the lion and the yearling together, and a little child shall lead them.*' (Is.11.6) Salvation is, then, not a matter of being saved from the earth or saved from matter. '*Creation itself*', writes Paul will be '*liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious liberty of the children of God*' (Rom.8.20). When we pray God's Kingdom to come, it is *on earth* as it is in heaven. As Origen wrote (*On Prayer* 26.2), as Christians our prayers and our lives are directed towards the 'celestification' of the earth that '*all persons and all things may become heaven*' (26.3), until as Paul puts it '*all shall be all in Christ*' (1 Cor.15.28). Our part in God's mission is to share with him '*in bringing all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ*' (Eph.1.10).

Why does it matter so much, this earthed, incarnate, enfleshed dimension of the Gospel? Because if we forget it or neglect it and become by default, as many have, dualists intent only on saving souls from this wicked earth, if we forget or deny the incarnation of God and the resurrection of the body we will be in danger also of neglecting or denying the material needs of the poor, the hungry and the homeless. The new commandment (*mandatum novum*) we remember on Thursday is not so much to save souls as to wash dirty smelly feet. Or, put another way, this is the way in which God in His saving purposes, loves. It is incarnational. The new commandment is to love as Jesus, the footwasher, loves. It is to love as Jesus, who came not to be served but to serve (Luke 22.27) loves. In Coventry and Warwickshire Christ is being honoured in many ministries of indiscriminate practical love, Food banks, shelter for the homeless, debt counselling, support for refugees, work with ex-prisoners and addicts, unemployed young people. This is God's love in action. It is good news. It is practical and it is also, without being evangelistic, actually missional. People outside the church recognise this ministry of service as somehow authentic and of God. Why? Because it is indiscriminate. It reflects God's love for all. When the Emperor Julian, in the 360s, tried to undo the work of Emperor Constantine by converting Christians back to paganism, he lamented his failure to do so. He wrote in a letter '*These impious Galileans (meaning Christians) support not only their own poor but ours as well.*' God's love overflows through the Church to **all** people.

In 1986 I spent 3 months living in a very deprived area of Washington D.C. There were times when I glimpsed the Kingdom of God breaking in amongst the poorest of the poor. It was an area of many homeless, of addicts, of street walkers, of all kinds of people who had fallen through the net of health insurance, of refugees. Every Thursday evening in Christ House, a large building owned by the Church where Christian doctors and nurses gave their time and skills freely to those in need, there was what I now call a heavenly banquet. The poor and the hungry, the people on the streets were invited in for a special meal of very good and nutritious food. Each guest was honoured – as Benedict did – as Christ himself. It was an indiscriminate, unconditional welcome in the name of the One who makes the sun to shine on the just and the unjust. It was a big enough space - like the space at the back of the Cathedral(!) - and the food was freely and joyfully given and prepared by

members of the Christian community, a number of whom had themselves previously lived on the streets. This truly was Good News to the Poor. Incarnate love feeding body, mind and spirit. Matter matters.

And finally, what about Creation itself, the matter of Creation (in both senses)? Genesis affirms both the goodness and the beauty of Creation. The Celtic cross places the world at the heart of Christ and Christ at the heart of the world. St John writes '*All things came into being through Christ and without him not one thing came into being.*' (John 1.3) St Paul writes '*All things on heaven and on earth have been created through him and for him*' (Col.1.10). So we cannot separate Creation from Christ '*for whom and through whom all things exist*' (Heb.2.10). Matthew's account of the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ makes clear this dynamic connection between Christ and creation. When Jesus cries out on the cross and 'breathes his last' the curtain of the Temple is torn in two from top to bottom and there is an earthquake (27.54). Likewise at the resurrection of Christ, there is an earthquake too (28.2). As we sing '*Jesus is Lord, Creation's voice proclaims it.*'

Just as all sorts of weird and wonderful, exotic and occult movements moved into the area of healing ministry abdicated by the Church, though it is at the heart of our calling and Christ's commission to us, so Greenpeace, the Green Party and all sorts of other organisations stepped into another space abdicated by the Church, which is also at the heart of our calling, namely the stewardship of God's creation. I say the Church but this is far truer of the Western Church which has more actively colluded in the exploitation of the earth and its resources than the Orthodox Church. As John Chryssavgis, Orthodox scholar, observes '*Where the Orthodox Church used to pray to be delivered from natural calamities, now they pray for the environment to be delivered from the abuse of humans*'. Under the Ecumenical Patriarch each Orthodox church is called to practise a voluntary self-limitation in the consumption of food and natural resources, to be proactive in the stewardship of God's creation. The disciplines of Lent – and perhaps especially Holy Week – enable us more easily to distinguish between what we want and what we need, to become more aware of the hunger of others and to respond to it and perhaps also to alert us to the abuse of God's creation itself on which we all depend. Part of what it means to participate, as each of us does, in the *priesthood* of God's people is to receive the earth and her fruits as a *gift* from God and in our worship and in our living to offer it back to God with thanksgiving (*eucharistia*), letting go of our possessive claims on the earth and its resources and recognising '*all things come from you O God and of your own do we give you.*' (I Chron.29.11).

So let us pray with the Psalmist

'Send forth your Spirit Lord, renew the face of the earth!'

And pray too that we may ourselves be part of the answer to this prayer.

+John Stroyan