



The Parish Churches of S Philip and S Augustine and S Matthew with S Mary the Virgin Newcastle

Homily for Easter V (3rd May) 2026

In 1954, the prominent New Testament scholar, FL Cross, published a lecture he had delivered, in which he suggested that a central portion of the Former Epistle of Saint Peter, including the passage read this morning, was drawn from a Baptismal Liturgy. Since then, in the way of these things, other academics weighed in to contradict this view.

I do not think that many people today would advance the theory; but the connexion between the Letter and Baptism is indisputable and it is not difficult to imagine a Liturgy where the newly baptized are exhorted with the words, "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of Him Who called you out of darkness into His marvellous light."

This sentence encapsulates much of what the Church understands of her identity and purpose, including the priestly element of her character. At the outset we might note that this priestly character applies not to a group within the Church, but to the community of the Baptized as a whole. Over time, we have come to assign to particular individuals the description of "priest," but we do this by abstraction: their role, by its function, embodies the priestly activity of the Christian community as a whole.

At this point, we need to turn to the Letter to the Hebrews, which tells us three important things about this priestly activity.

First, our priestly character is derived from the priesthood of Christ and does not stand alone apart from Him. It is only as His Body that we constitute a priestly people: and ultimately it is His priesthood, which flows through the Church.

Secondly, there is only the one Sacrifice. Our sacrificial activity does not comprise numerous discrete events, but, as Liturgical texts sometimes put it, the pleading of the once-and-for-all Sacrifice offered by Christ.

This brings us to the third point: that the Sacrifice, which we offer is Christ Himself. In the words of a hymn, He is both Priest and Victim in the Sacrifice of the New Covenant. The hymn, of course, refers to the Eucharistic feast; but we should not confine our understanding of Christian sacrifice to the Liturgical context.

In the Epistle-general of Saint James, we are memorably warned that, "Faith divorced from deeds is barren." It is not just through our corporate prayer that the Christly Sacrifice flows, but in the offering of our lives: the choices and actions, which reflect the Gospel to which we have committed ourselves. The Gospel is, so to speak, the rubrics - the ceremonial instructions - of daily Christian life.

We are presented, therefore, with a strand of the Church's identity as a people - indeed a holy people - one set apart from the generality of humanity - a holy people distinguished by a spirit of self-sacrifice: both in our own lives and, as the priesthood of the New Covenant, in our corporate prayer, we plead, Christ's saving Sacrifice, "The wonderful deeds of Him Who called us out of darkness into His marvellous light."

It is into this people that we are incorporated by our Baptism; and it is in this spirit of self-sacrifice that we find our way out of the darkness of worldly hegemony and shine the light of Christ's Triumph that we have experienced into the world around us.