



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

Homily for Lent IV (15th March) 2026

At this point in the century six hundred years ago, a battle was convulsing the Western Church, which we came to call the Reformation. In 1517, the then Father Martin Luther, a friar of the Augustinian Order - like the present Pope - had created ninety-five theses of critique of the doctrine and practice of the Roman Church, which he might have nailed to the door of All Saints Wittenburg.

Over time, he elaborated on these in his writings, developing amongst other things, the tag of *sola fide* - by faith alone. This reflected his insistence that we are redeemed not through good works, but only by Faith in Jesus Christ. Such was the strength of his conviction that he dismissed the Epistle General of Saint James as the *Epistle of Straw*, because of its emphasis on the importance of good works - encapsulated in the phrase that, "Faith divorced from deeds is barren." It was an interesting judgement for a man who also promoted the unique authority of Holy Scripture in another tag: *sola Scriptura* - by Scripture alone.

Few nowadays would argue that he did not have a point about the venality of the Roman Church at that time; and, indeed, there were people, who never broke with the Church - and a few of whom were subsequently raised to the Altars - but who echoed some of his sentiments. He was also correct in his inference that there was a view amongst some Christians - maybe many - that Redemption could be secured by good works, which is why *Pelagianism*, the heresy which promoted this view, is singled out for condemnation in the Reformation era *Thirty-nine Articles of Religion*.

However, as the Epistle General of Saint James asserts, good works are not the means of Redemption, but the response to it. Those of us, who believe that in Christ we have the prospect of Salvation, are called to proclaim that belief to the world by the quality and character of our lives.

A couple of weeks ago, I spoke briefly about the pursuit of personal holiness - the individual response to our hope of Redemption; but interacting with this is the need for the Christian community as, so to speak, a corporation, to undertake good works.

From a practical point-of-view, what can be achieved is often greater than the potential of the sum of the parts: we can accomplish more together than we can operating separately. Furthermore, the experience of working together serves as part of the task of developing our individual discipleship.

However, from a more conceptual perspective, we need to remember that a Christian community does have, as it were, a personality of its own. As with individuals, it, too, can manifest the Faith, which pervades it and holds it together. Additionally, in the midst of a shared task, individual contributions can find a degree of anonymity thus lessening the extent to which any one of us, in the words of the Gospel on Ash Wednesday, parades our good works before men.

Once again, as Saint James observes, a Christian community cannot live just for the spiritual benefits of its members; it is called by Christ to model faithfulness - as we might put it today - both in the way that we relate to one another and also by our engagement with the society around us. Through us, the incarnate Christ continues to walk through the neighbourhoods of our world.

Working together puts flesh on the bones of the theological portrayal of the oneness of the Church, which sits at the heart of our Liturgy as we make our offering and receive Holy Communion.