



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

Homily for Lent V (22nd March) 2026

In the days when I attended the National Pilgrimage at Walsingham, as the procession passed through the village, it would encounter protestors standing around the well, calling out criticisms of what was happening around them. There was a time when the feeling of acrimony was palpable as the pilgrims made their way to the ruins of the abbey church; but by the time that I was there, with the era of righteous antagonism passing, they were not so much threatening as part of the experience of the day.

Never-the-less, they still made their point, waving placards declaring that there is only one Mediator between God and man and that is Jesus Christ. The immediate focus of their irritation was, of course, the honour that was being done to Mary; but behind this the slogan actually impugns the whole panoply of Masses and priesthood, which they believe corrupts the essential, as it were, one-to-one relationship between Christ and the individual.

They are, of course, correct in citing Christ as the only Mediator between God and man. However, their interpretation of this truth fails to do justice to the New Testament texts, which make clear the Church is incorporated into Christ as His Body. The framework of Masses, which punctuates the life of Christian discipleship and the priesthood, which facilitates it, is not a denial of Christ as the only Mediator between God and man, but the expression of it - and, we would say, the means which God has given to individual believers to strengthen and sustain our discipleship.

This we can do on the basis of a metaphor, which, according to Saint John, Jesus uses about His relationship with the Church: "I am the Vine, you are the branches." Saint Paul, in his Letter to the Church in Rome, uses a similar metaphor, using an olive tree rather than a vine. Both of these posit an intrinsic relationship between Christ and the Church. The Church is not simply a humanly assembled association of Christians, but the means by which we relate to Christ and He to us.

To be sure, the branches are frequently battered and broken and unappealing; they bear a paucity of fruit, or bitter fruit or sometimes no fruit at all; but all the same, by their baptism, they spring from Christ. As Saint Paul says, part of the task of Christian discipleship is to relate to and work with the other branches; in fact, this responsibility pervades all aspects of our discipleship. As I said a couple of weeks ago, even the things that we necessarily do individually and in private none-the-less are not undertaken apart from our membership of the Church.

At the centre of the of this working together is the Mass, when the Church is most obviously the Church: gathered in penitence for our shortcomings and thanksgiving for God's great goodness, we turn towards Christ and, in the act of Holy Communion, visibly drawing our strength from Him. This is an inherently corporate undertaking; and not just because there are necessarily a number of people present, but because it is by the interaction of a congregation that it exercises its priesthood. The Mass is not a matter of one or even a few people dispensing the Sacrament to the others, but all the baptized cooperating to celebrate the Sacrament for the strengthening and sustaining of all - as individuals and a Christian community.

This understanding of the corporate character of Christian discipleship is supported by Jesus' dictum recorded in Saint Matthew's Gospel, "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." Christ's Presence inheres in the bonds of Christian community.

There is a constantly nagging impulse to individualise and privatise one's religious life - to retreat, as it were, into Me and Jesus: the problem is that Jesus calls to us from all the other Christians, Whom He has admitted into the fellowship of His religion.