



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

Homily for Sunday XIX (7th August) 2022

As we heard in the Epistle this morning, Jewish people trace the origins of their status as God's Chosen People to the faithful response of Abraham and Sarah to God's promise. In the centuries which followed, that status became institutionalised in the lineal descent of the Twelve Tribes of Israel and, for a period, centred around the worship offered in the Temple at Jerusalem.

However, as the prophets were periodically at pains to point out, these institutions were not the substance of Jewish identity. Rather, the key feature of the Covenant between God and His Chosen People was or should have been the perpetuation and emulation of the faith and trust placed in God by Sarah and Abraham. At times, however, this principle was rather lost as Jewish people relied on their family heritage, the possession of the Temple and what today we would call a casuist approach to the divine Law as the guarantee of their continuing favour in God's eyes: and in this they deceived themselves.

It was not that the various institutions of Jewish identity were unimportant; but that they only had value insofar as they clothed fidelity to the Covenant and its specification of trust and faith in God, exemplified by the moral character of Jewish society. It was not the persons of Abraham and Sarah, but their act of Faith on which the election of the Jewish people was founded.

When the Covenant was renewed in Christ, automatic membership of the People of God through birth was replaced by Baptism and the Temple worship was replaced by the Sacraments, supremely the Mass. It would be easy to suppose that these alterations rather obviated the danger of falling into a perspective which elevates the institution above its purpose; but such a notion would be mistaken.

It has proved all too easy over the centuries to slip into the same attitude as that criticised by the prophets: that so long as we are baptized and go to church - when it is convenient - that we fulfil our Christian duty. However, the Sacraments and the other institutions of the Church - God-given as they are - are not ends in themselves, but means to a greater end, which is the fashioning of individuals and societies into the people God wishes them to be.

This perspective underlies Jesus' words in the Gospel reading this morning: the character of Christian discipleship is not one of inert status, but of action: responding to the events and circumstances that we see around us. In this, Jesus tells us, we should always be ready for whatever comes our way.

The proposition that we should, in the contemporary jargon, always be in a heightened state of readiness is unrealistic, since there are times when we shall be distracted and eventualities for which our past experience cannot prepare us.

Instead, we should understand His injunction to encourage us to refine our characters so that our default response to events and calls on us will be one, which reflects the qualities promoted by the Gospel: so that we have almost an unthinking tendency to react in a Godly manner to the people and circumstances we encounter: to emulate the faithful response of Sarah and Abraham from which emerged the Jewish nation into which Jesus was born.

It is in shaping our characters in this way that the ecclesiastical institutions find their proper purpose - not as a proxy for Christian conduct, but first as the means by which we develop ourselves into faithful disciples; and secondly, as expressions of the Faith from which they spring; because Faith is not primarily a status, but an approach to God, to life and to the world around us.