



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

### Homily for the Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time (1<sup>st</sup> September) 2024

Some might suppose that we, here, with the developed Liturgical ceremonial are somewhat put on the back foot in the face of the Gospel reading this morning and its critique of the *traditions of the elders*. In fact, we are no more and no less challenged by Jesus' words.

All religious principle and truth needs to be given expression in concrete disciplines and practices: the obsessive stripping of churches and liturgies at the Reformation constituted just as much a set of traditions of the elders as did the Catholic rituals they displaced: absence of things can be equally as imposing as their presence. We might even describe the habits with which we clothe our Liturgy and the rules we develop to regulate the life of faith as incarnational - putting flesh on the bones of the revelation in which we believe.

However, none of that serves to swerve around what Jesus had to say about the traditions of the elders; and we need constantly to have His words in mind.

At the same time, we need to be careful of the treachery of language, which can so easily confound two things, which are not the same. In this case, the word "Tradition" is something, which can so easily be misunderstood; and to extricate ourselves from the confusion we might distinguish between soft and hard traditions.

Soft traditions are precisely those traditions of the elders of which Jesus spoke. They are man-made rules and practices devised to give expression to our Faith. At any time, they are only our best guess; and they should not be permitted to override or conflict with the tenets of our religion, which they are meant to embody. It follows that when such is a risk, these soft traditions should yield to the higher principles either in a moment or, sometimes, permanently as it is recognised that whatever utility they might have served has had its day.

Set against this is what we might call hard tradition - what is sometimes denoted as the *Traditio*. To understand what this might be, we might recall that in the former Letter to the Corinthians, Saint Paul speaks of the Eucharist as *paradosis*, a Greek word, which we translate as *tradition*. However, this is not a *paradosis* from the elders, but from Christ Himself.

In fact, of course, the Faith in its entirety is *paradosis* or *tradition* in the sense that it is handed down from generation to generation. This is true as much of Holy Scripture as it is of the Eucharist. As I observe from time to time, Christians were going to Mass before even the earliest New Testament texts found their written form; and it would be several centuries before it was finally decided which documents would be included in the Scriptural canon. In the melting pot of ideas, which were the Apostolic and sub-Apostolic generations, it was not a given - certainly for everyone - that what we now call the Old Testament would be included in the privileged texts, which would be handed down. In other words, our forebears in the Faith made this determination.

This *Traditio* - as opposed to tradition - although handed down through the generations, we believe, as Saint Paul would put, to have been received from the Lord - either during His incarnate Ministry or subsequently through the guiding of His risen Presence among us. As such it is part of the revealed Truth on which our Faith is built; and it is this, which soft tradition - the *tradition of the elders* - should not be permitted to undermine.