

THE WORSHIPFUL COMPANY OF FRUITERERS

LIVERY SERVICE

25 JANUARY 2011

I thank you for the kind invitation to me to take part in this historic Livery Service. I recognise and salute your ancient Company with its aims of seeking to enhance our appreciation of fruit, its production and associated business and playing a key role in the City of London with the Lord Mayor, not least in charitable work.

Fruitfulness, of course, is an idea well established in religious thought and imagery. For the most part it is so in a very positive and creative sense.

We may leave aside the imagery of the Book of Genesis with its Garden of Eden and enticing apple!

Rather, the association of fruitfulness in the Christian faith is best caught by the quotation used on the back of our Service booklet for today: 'The fruit of the Spirit is love joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.' Indeed!

Our focus today is, of course, on the author of those words, St Paul, as we keep the Feast of his Conversion to faith in Jesus Christ. The drama of that conversion is so well-known, as is its fruitfulness in a mission of spreading the Good News of faith in the Lord.

Yet Paul would tell us not to forget about the apple.

He reminds us often of that inherent flaw in human nature which is signalled in the phrase 'original sin'. That fault-line is well known to each of us: the conflict of interests we experience within ourselves, the sense of being pulled in at least two different directions and the lack of certainty as to which way to go. This uncertainty about the foundations of moral choice is so evident in our society today. I think Paul would have a lot to say about that.

Indeed he would probably be sending us a Letter, just like he did to the community of Philippians. His letters always had a purpose, always addressed a particular issue or problem. In this case it was the danger of the Church in Philippi breaking up into factions, losing its fundamental unity.

The passage we have just heard is rightly regarded as one of the greatest passages ever written by Paul. It is the high point of the argument he is putting forward about the causes of disunity and the pathway to be taken to strengthen and deepen a common cause.

Just a little earlier, Paul has spoken about the sources, or causes, of disaffection and dissent within the community. He names them as selfish ambition, the desire for personal prestige, and concentration on self. Now these are not unknown among us. They are part of the well-known face of original sin. When we are really motivated by selfish ambition for high office, rather than by a sense of service, then trouble begins. When we are on the look-out, first of all, for recognition and praise, then we will fall by the cry of public opinion as quickly as we have been raised by it.

When we can think only of ourselves, then life becomes no more than a competition which we must always win and so much else is lost.

These, St Paul tells us, are the root causes of division and acrimony.

What are we to do about it? Paul's answer is not very politically correct. Those who advance it today will be told, in no uncertain terms, - as I often am - that they are 'out of touch with society'.

The qualities Paul proposes are those of humility, self-effacement and putting other peoples' interests first. Hardly a contemporary approach to social advancement! Or is it? We might just ask, for a moment, about the people who have shaped our human history, who are humanities greatest benefactors.

I think many would actually embody those very qualities.

But Paul's argument, in the end, is not about values or principles. It is about a person, the one person in whom these qualities are to be seen in their most complete and dramatic form. That person is Jesus, the Christ, and the passage we have heard presents him as the only true source of the unity, coherence, social cohesion for which we long.

Why is this so? Paul tells us. In Christ we see the image of true humility, that thorough desire to serve others, to give oneself away for a greater cause. But we see these qualities, Paul insists, in one who is God. Here it is God himself who assumes, embraces, anoints these qualities as the truth about us human beings and as the truth about God himself.

In Christ we see the humility of the human and the reality of the divine inseparably united. This is the heart of his argument: the unity we seek will be found in this same coming together of service and power, of self-emptying and greatness, of sacrifice and love.

May I take a minute to look at just two of the key words in this passage?

Paul says that Christ Jesus ‘emptied himself’. He uses a word which means the total emptying out of a vessel or container, until there is nothing left. He uses this vivid word to make clear the sacrifice of the incarnation itself. In Christ, the Creator of all emptied himself ‘to become a slave’. This is the measure of the sacrifice which love brings about.

Everything that we are asked to give up, every sacrifice we suffer, whether willing or not, can now be absorbed into this one great sacrifice, self-emptying, of love and find meaning there. This is the mystery of love so great that although we can never fully understand it, we can experience it and praise God by the way we live in its light.

A second word: Lord – Kurios. It means, first of all, master or owner; it became a title of the Roman emperor; it became the title of the Greek and Roman gods. Here it is used in the first and most succinct of all statements of Christian faith. This is the shortest Creed of all: Jesus is Lord. He is the master and owner of life; He is the King of all rulers and emperors; He is above all the lesser gods and idols that so quickly populate our hearts and dominate our newspapers.

Jesus is Lord. He, who is above all others, teaches us how to be ourselves in his humility, self-emptying and loving service.

This truth is behind the Gospel passage we heard. The disciples are anxious about their status, their reward and their prospects. Yes, discipleship means that we leave things behind; yet it also means that we receive: repaid one hundred fold, inheriting eternal life.

What a strange message this gives to our society. Today many sense a loss of common purpose or direction. We are concerned about a fracturing of our society. Yet at the same time we constantly exalt personal opinion and individual achievement. From the rooftops voices proclaim the very qualities that contribute to our anxieties.

But this message is quite different: humility about oneself, openness towards others, both rooted in the awareness of God and the truth God speaks and shows, are our best way forward. In Christ they are held together: humility and divinity. Abandon one, by living as if God did not exist, and the other becomes nothing more than scorned weakness. Held together they are a key to our salvation.

As this Company invests its new Master let us pray for him and for all your members. May the Lord bless you all. May he truly be, as we have sung, ‘first in my heart’ bringing to us that freedom of humility and that willingness to serve others which are the source of such joy.

Amen

✠ Vincent Nichols
Archbishop of Westminster