

Seventh Sunday of Easter Year B 2021

16.v.21

Fr Stephen Hearn

When I have finished preaching this sermon – and yes, that time will come – we will say together, “I believe” in a whole gamut of things ranging from the strictly historical (“...was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate”) to the completely unverifiable (“...being of one substance with the Father”). It will contain still-contentious clauses, like “proceedeth from the Father *and the Son*” which not only divides the Christian world but requires some pretty specialist linguistic understanding to explain why on earth it does so. When I say, “I believe” what am I really affirming? That I assent to all of these propositions? If so, what on earth constitutes my assent – do I imagine that I am required to decide whether I agree with the logical felicity or the probability of each being a statement of fact? What if I find one rather difficult to stomach?

This all becomes rather important when one considers how often we are told in the scriptures that it is through faith that we are saved; or that, in order to be saved, we must “believe” in the Lord Jesus. “The one who believes and is baptised will be saved” says Mark’s Jesus, “but the one who does not believe will be condemned.”¹ Is my salvation on rocky ground if I find it rather difficult to believe that parthenogenesis in humans is a possibility? The truism that doubt is part of faith is all very well, but its speaker tends to imply that all this really *is* factually true but that God won’t mind if I, personally, find it difficult to swallow. It’s very easy to feel that we are burdened by a requirement to reach solid conclusions about faith – that our relationship with God depends on our ability to accept particular facts as true. I always found it particularly difficult as a young person growing up in a nonconformist church to be told that I would be saved by faith and not works; and yet faith seemed to me to be the most challenging of all possible works. And where does such a requirement leave those with, say, severe learning disabilities or dementia?

The corpus of literature in the New Testament that has been attached to the name of the beloved Disciple, the Gospel of John and the three letters that bear his name, is

¹ Mk. 16.16.

particularly concerned with the idea of religious knowledge. That is to say, knowledge of God and about God's activity in the world. Our second reading today, from the first letter of John, is an entirely typical passage, using the kind of phrases littered throughout all three letters. In today's passage, the writer talks about several modes of conscious apprehension; in particular testifying, confessing, and believing: "And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Saviour of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. So we have known and believe the love that God has for us." It's not hard to catch the echoes of the way Jesus talks about himself in John's Gospel – as being one with his Father, as receiving his message from his Father and as having been sent into the world. But all of this is not really a matter of having seen Jesus and concluded through patient analysis that, on balance, what he said was true. How could one possible do so?

Unlike Paul, the Johannine letters are not very focussed on the resurrection as a source of faith. Rather it is the work of the Spirit in life of the human person that is the precondition of knowledge of God: "By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit". It is not until the Spirit acts, that it is possible to have any real apprehension of the divine. It's not that, in order for God to abide in us, we must confess that Jesus is the Son of God – rather, that *until* God abides in us, we will be unable to confess that Jesus is the Son of God. And how does this indwelling of the Spirit manifest itself? In love – as we have been hearing in our readings over the past several weeks: "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them." The letters almost hypnotically draw together knowing and loving into a single act: "He that loveth not, knoweth not God; for God is love."² This is because knowledge as the writer understands it, *gnosis*, is fundamentally a gift from God of god's own self. God doesn't know things by *coming* to know them as external to himself in the way that we do. He doesn't observe and draw conclusions or decide between competing theories. All things belong to him, all reality is sustained by his power – his knowledge is not the result of cognition, it is just who he is. This all sounds very theologically *nice*. So think rather of being in love. The knowledge, the understanding, one has of one's love is deeper than observation can

² 1 John 4.8

allow; it is mysterious and deep within oneself. It becomes a part of oneself. This mysterious unity is just a tiny fraction of the unity between God and his creation, “in whom we live and move and have our being.” The knowledge of God that we receive from the Spirit as a gift is not a revelation of facts about God, after the manner of human knowledge; it is the kind of knowledge that God enjoys – an immediate, wordless, joyful, intimate experience. This gift is given in baptism, when the Spirit is poured into our hearts; but it is unwrapped, as it were, over a lifetime – indeed an eternity – as the love of God is made perfect in us. For it is only insofar as we love others that we are able to know, to experience the reality of, God.

In today’s gospel, we reach the climax of the long prayer that Jesus prays over his disciples at the last supper. We have been hearing this prayer, and Jesus’ instructions that come just before it, over the Sundays of Eastertide. Many theologians have noticed that Jesus’ prayer feels a lot like the first part of the Eucharistic prayer that comes immediately after the *Sanctus*. Many of the themes present from the earliest Eucharistic prayers are there, in particular the holiness of God and a request for the sanctification – “consecration” in some translations – of holy gifts.³ It is commonplace to note that John does not narrate the institution of the Eucharist but that his gospel is drenched in Eucharistic imagery and teaching. In today’s gospel, Jesus begins the Eucharistic prayer, as it were, establishing himself as both the priest and the offering of the mass. What follows immediately in the gospel narrative is the passion and crucifixion. So, if Jesus’ words are the opening of the Eucharistic prayer, the passion *itself* continues the Eucharistic prayer, and is the equivalent of the words of consecration (“take, eat this is my body...”) and offering to the Father (“As we offer you this our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving...”).⁴ But it is not only Christ who is the Eucharistic offering – it is his friends as well: “Sanctify them the truth; your word is truth... and for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.” In each and every Eucharist, we are drawn into Christ’s self-offering of love by the power of the Spirit, we become one with him on the altar of the cross (Jesus in the

³ Compare the text of Eucharistic Prayer B, which is a translation of the 3rd Century Roman liturgy, with the climax of Jesus’ prayer: “Lord, you are holy indeed, the source of all holiness; grant that by the power of your Holy Spirit, and according to your holy will, these gifts of bread and wine may be to us the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

⁴ And the breathing of the Holy Spirit on the disciples after the resurrection can be compared to “Send the Holy Spirit on your people...” Such mapping of the text is fruitful theologically, but of course impossible to prove philologically.

synoptics would say, “take up your cross and follow me”). This morning, as we offer bread and wine we offer ourselves, too; and yet the offering is of Christ himself – as the Spirit makes the bread and wine, and us, the very body of Christ. As Saint Augustine puts it, we receive what we already are in the Eucharist – the body of Christ – that we may become more perfectly what we are, until “all are one in Christ Jesus.”⁵

“It is not that we loved God, but that God first loved us.” The precondition of belief is the work of the Spirit, and the substance of belief is love. Therefore, a person wholly without the cognitive ability to describe anything approaching a doctrinal position can have saving faith; indeed – a *knowledge* of God of the kind only lovers can enjoy. A knowledge that is truer and more profound than all the achievement of science. So when we say the creed, we are not privately assenting to propositions; we are joining ourselves to Christians’ experience of being loved by God throughout history, to the Church’s meditation on Jesus Christ, her lover and bridegroom, on his saving love in the life of humanity. The whole of the Christian life is a Eucharist: a thanksgiving to God for his unutterable love. God, who sends his Holy Spirit on us to make us holy, to make us the body and blood of Christ, poured out for the salvation of the world. God, who accepts with joy the offering of Christ’s love in us, and brings us to be with him, the lover of our souls, throughout all ages, world without end.

Amen.

⁵ Gal. 3.28