

CONFESSING
Lent 1
St Michael Cornhill
Sung Eucharist
Sunday February 14th 2016

One of the joys of training for the priesthood was to live for three years in an Oxfordshire village where we were as much part of the local community as we were part of the college. I even edited the Parish Magazine for a time! One church service which claimed a pre-eminence not accorded it in city or suburban life was, of course, the Harvest Festival. The star performer was the reader of the Old Testament lesson, who was a lovely local farmer, with a strong Oxfordshire accent. We all waited for this moment every year.

It was the very same reading as our Old Testament lection this morning and the key line was ‘you shall make this response before the Lord our God: ‘A wandering *Aramaean* was my ancestor, he went down to Egypt and lived there as an alien ...’ etc. Without fail, Cyril, the farmer began: ‘A wandering Armenian was my father.’ It mattered not how much we tutored him, the ancestor remained an Armenian. For students, however, it was a fortuitous error for it reminded them that scholars saw this as a key passage in the Jewish scriptures.

Why is it so significant? Well, because it is effectively the Jewish equivalent of a *creed*. The faithful Jews were to recite this as a community before the priest. It was a creed that marked out the special identity of the nation, but more important still, it bound that community of people to their God. The dénouement as it were, of the creed comes a few verses later, when we read: ‘The Lord brought us out of Egypt and with a mighty hand and outstretched arm . . . he brought us into this place . . . a land flowing with milk and honey.’

So this creed recognised God’s promised salvation and it declared too Israel’s loyalty and love for their God. Now interestingly enough, and I’m sure not by accident, our second reading from St. Paul’s letter to the Romans, also has caught up within it another primitive creed. Listen again for a moment to Paul: ‘What does scripture say? “The word is near you, on your lips and on your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim) because if you can confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.’

Reading it casually your eyes, heart and mind can easily miss this tiny creed, which was probably one of the earliest and simplest declarations of Christian faith. Interestingly it’s introduced with the word *confess*: if you *confess* with your lips, Jesus is Lord. Now this word *confess* has become almost synonymous with guilt and wrongdoing. People talk of making their ‘confession’ – especially in Lent! It’s even been rather devalued in risqué books and films called ‘Confessions of a window-cleaner, Confessions of a milkman or whatever.’

But *confess* in essence has a far broader range of meaning. For in origin it is about the very centre of our being, not only individually, but corporately. It is about who we are and what we believe about God in Jesus. Perhaps the best known early example of this usage is the remarkable *Confessions of St. Augustine*. This most famous of Augustine’s was Bishop of Hippo in Carthage in North Africa. He is one of the key philosophers and theologians who has helped fashion western civilisation. His remarkable book, *The City of God*, set out a noble vision of a society shaped but not constrained by Christian belief: he wrote it as he watched the Roman Empire disintegrate, in the face of the huge migrant invasions from the north east. Some resonances for us there, albeit from the south and east, in our own age!

So both the Apostles and the Nicene creed are ‘confessions’ of faith, confessions adhered to and honoured by all mainstream Christians. In the revised liturgies of all mainstream churches the Nicene Creed reverts to its earliest form and so begins *We believe*. So it’s first of all a community confession. But second, it’s not a sort of tick-list that we must all sign up to in total

when we confess our faith. Some scrupulous people miss out some phrases because they're not sure they quite believe that bit. But that's to miss the point. First and foremost we confess our faith to declare our love and allegiance corporately of the God of Jesus Christ whom we worship and adore. We don't do it to prove our orthodoxy.

Indeed, some individual churches and communions have arrived at a unique and individual confession which defines their own brand of Christianity – so, for example, Lutherans adhere to the Augsburg Confession. But even here it's not a tick-list. It's as I've said, a declaration of love and allegiance to our God.

That is exactly what the *Confessions of Augustine* set out. There *are* moments when he admits to former sins. But the book is effectively a spiritual autobiography which charts the course of Augustine's mind and heart from unbelief and also other weird beliefs till he finds Christ there in his own heart. It is a most beautiful book, as readable and moving as the most modern biography. You cannot believe it was written almost seventeen hundred years ago. Why not pick up a copy and read it? There are many excellent and accessible translations, published by Penguin and others. It's even a tiny bit racy in places!

Perhaps we can now begin to see why, as we begin Lent, we are treated to these different primitive creeds or confessions in our readings. Even the gospel, with its account of Jesus' temptation, runs in parallel. Jesus confesses his unwavering love for the Father in response to all that is thrown at him in evil desires and other things which take his heart away from the love of the Father. There is a most marvellous passage within Augustine's *City of God* that finally notes where the journey will take him. It's a wonderful starter for Lent and worth repeating to ourselves over the next forty days. Augustine writes:

‘We shall rest and we shall see, we shall see and we shall love, we shall love and we shall praise, in that end which has no end, even Jesus Christ our God and Saviour.’

Amen

Readings:

Deut. 26. 1- 11.

Romans. 10. 8b-13.

Luke 4. 1-13.