

## INFECTED WITH CHRIST

Eucharist with Baptism

Trinity III

St Michael Cornhill

Saturday, June 21<sup>st</sup> 2015

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Harry Macleod was the modern equivalent of a sheep stealer. He came from Alnwick in Northumberland and may, for all I know, still be around there. There might have been short periods when he had been detained at Her Majesty's pleasure, but he was no tough criminal. Then there was Joe. Joe had mainlined on heroin but had been detoxed and was now effectively in convalescence; sadly, only months later, after passing back into the drug scene, he died through narcotic poisoning. Finally, Hugo, who had been second in command of the Inland Revenue, but after his wife's death had descended into the depths of alcoholism. He too died a year or so after I first met him.

All these people I met at the Friary in Alnmouth in Northumberland. They are just three characters from a continuous stream of victims either to illness or to the fallibility of the human condition. That fallibility is one to which every one of us is a victim at one level or another. The remarkable thing which ran alongside these people was the group of friars within whose care they lay. They came from hugely varied backgrounds. One friar was the son of a former Postmaster-General and Minister in the pre-War coalition government. Another was a former hairdresser from Birmingham, and yet another, Brother John, a former locomotive driver in the dying days of steam with the Midland Region of British Rail, formerly the L.M.S. John was a great Derby County supporter. I could regale with still more variety amongst the brothers – they were an extraordinary group.

But perhaps more remarkable than their difference and their variety was their sense of common purpose, of the common good. It issued from their grasp of the Christian gospel. They were no plaster cast saints; they were fallible human beings. But they had been *infected* by the gospel of Jesus Christ. I can think of no better word, for somehow the power of the gospel shaped their lives; God's grace was poured out to others like those I've just described. All this I saw for myself, but it was crystallised that much more powerfully a few years later in a most unexpected way.

One of those anniversaries, of the sort with which we're now obsessed, occurred. It may have been that of the arrival of friars in England seven hundred or more years earlier or it may have been an anniversary of the Society of St. Francis itself, I can't remember.

What I can remember is that there was a great celebration in Westminster Abbey. The celebrant was Robert Mortimer, the scholar 'Prince-Bishop' of Exeter. The preacher was Michael Ramsey, Archbishop of Canterbury and former Regius Professor of Divinity in the University of Cambridge. Here was my chance as a very young man to hear this great man and to see him close up. His text that day came from our second reading: 'As poor, yet making many rich.' This was the Archbishop's take on what those Anglican friars had given – and I would say continued to give.

Those words of Paul are both moving and inspiring, and especially as we baptise Alexander Pradhan Sankey. They are words which effectively describe the Christian life. They are words which describe the 'gospel infection' which I hope we've all caught, and perhaps the only infection we'd want to pass on to a tiny baby like Alexander!

So how, then, does Paul describe the Christian life? Let me remind you: 'As servants of God we are called to commend ourselves in every way. . . through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships and calamities. . . by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness . . . in

honour and dishonour, in ill repute and good repute. . . as unknown and yet well known, as dying and behold we live.’

Paul is realistic about our humanity, but he knew positively too what this infection of Jesus Christ could mean:

‘As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing, as poor yet making many rich, as having nothing yet possessing everything,’ These were the qualities I saw lived out by those friars. Paul’s words are inspiring to a degree. They offer a vision of life which can transform our world. Oh that we might pass on this vision, this infection, by the impact of our lives to tiny Alexander.

In our first reading we hear God speaking to Job:

‘Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth – when the morning stars say together and all the heavenly beings shouted for you? All this, in other words, is God’s world. Jesus’ coming among us, his death and resurrection resonate perfectly with that. Here then is the vision for us in Jesus:

‘As poor yet making many rich, as having nothing and yet possessing everything.’

Amen

### Readings

Job. 38. 1-11.

IICor. 6. 1- 13.

Mark. 4. 35 – end.