

SERMON AT MASS – TRINITY 8 2012

Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down and cast into the fire.

Sometimes the sayings of Jesus seem like a statement of the obvious.

Yes, if you had a tree that consistently produced rotten fruit you would get rid of it.

The space it occupied would be better used by a new tree that might well produce an abundance of good fruit.

He was teaching his followers how to be in a largely hostile world, and not merely picking at horticultural metaphor to no particular purpose.

He knew that they would encounter hostility and that those with keen perception would be able to suss out setups that were basically a confidence trick.

People would recognise them by their fruits.

Nor is Jesus merely speaking to his contemporaries.

The primitive Church soon realised that the Gospels – the memoirs of the apostles – had a universal application to the life of the christian community throughout the ages.

That is why a reading from the Gospel is enshrined in the Eucharistic celebration, and why we stand to listen to it.

In many churches it reading is accompanied by light and incense.

Because in a very real sense, here is Jesus himself speaking to us, uttering to this very community the heart of his teaching, his deep desire for the community of his followers.

Today he speaks to us, as he does every Sunday.

Sometimes his teaching is enigmatic, sometimes ironic, almost always jaw-dropping.

The Gospels are a nightmare for the biblical literalist, for they often cut across the agenda of those who value the teaching of St Paul more than that of Jesus.

And yet, strangely, the Gospels often speak to the modern world more eloquently than any other section of scripture.

Jesus speaks to us here and now, today.

To me, to you, to St Michael's.

Are we good trees that bring forth good fruit, or are we rotten trees that bring forth nothing but rotten fruit?

Is St Michael's a corrupt tree?

Does it exert a baleful influence of those who encounter it?

Are people repelled by the ethos of this place?

Does it speak gospel – a Gospel redolent of the love of God – or a travesty that supports dissent and dissatisfaction?

Does it see itself as a bastion against change, a place where the modern world can be denied and excluded?

I believe it does none of these things, and that it is a good tree that brings forth good fruit.

All the time I have been here – nearly eight months now – I have encountered nothing but genuine human warmth.

I don't believe it is just because I have come here to keep the show on the road.

I am convinced that that is the genuine atmosphere of the place – a community motivated by the love of God and by a desire to love and serve him and one another.

Those who worship here genuinely see this sacrament as a real encounter with Christ himself in his body and blood and are eager to draw others into that orbit.

Of course a community like this is fragile.

Metropolitan churches always are, those in the City particularly so.

It is easy for people to gravitate to a church like this when they fall out with the church back home.

Matters of taste are critically important and legitimate.

But here we are not members of St Michael's.

Through baptism we are members of the Church Universal, for which Christ gave and still gives his life.

So even if other churches repel us through matters of style, we are still one with them, and perhaps a source of energy and support for them in the personal and corporate growth that takes place because we are in a place where we feel happy.

But so easily a church like this can seem to be in a state of collapse.

People disappear for no apparent reason, numbers plummet.

Income shrivels.

It can even prompt the question 'why are we still here?' when others seem either to have moved to another church or stopped going altogether.

This often happens during an interregnum and always prompts a feeling of unease, depression even.

We have a basic duty, an obligation, as a parish church in the city, to be here, offering the worship of almighty God.

It is what we are for.

But what should we be aiming for if we are to draw others into the life of this community and sustain them in it?

We are called really only to two things:

To love God and to build community.

In practice loving God means a deep corporate and individual devotion to the One who made us and who has shown his love for us through its enfleshment in Jesus of Nazareth.

This requires constant commitment and re-commitment on our part, and a willingness to give priority to meetings of the community where we are fed and sustained by Christ himself and drawn more and more into the life of God the Blessed Trinity.

We should be focused on God, who has called us to be where we are, to grow in his love and proclaim it in any way we can in our daily lives.

It is natural for a human community of love and support to grow from this, and therefore we meet after worship to share common concerns and to welcome new people.

And if we can reflect on the priorities of a community eager to attract those searching for an authentic manifestation of classical Christianity, we can do little more than aim for dignified liturgy, good music and intelligent preaching.

Word gets around.

I say all of this with more than a hint of irony on the last Sunday St Michael's will be open till the beginning of September.

The peculiar circumstances of the interregnum make this something the churchwardens consider to be a necessity.

I am sure you will worship elsewhere during these coming week and return here refreshed and glad to be back.

A corrupt tree?

I think not.

Let me end with a quotation from a rather helpful commentary on the Eucharistic lectionary:

But in all this it is Christ himself who is revealed: the Beloved Son, joy of the blessed, seated at the right hand of the Father; the just man persecuted, killed for sinners, forgiving his executioners on the cross; the Son of Man who gave all for humankind, even his own life. This is why the whole Church and every Christian community give thanks to the Father most holy, God eternal and all-powerful, joining their voices to those of the angels and saints.