

## Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

**The Reverend Andrew Sempell**

*Rector of St James*

### **Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost**

(b-os18)

**5<sup>th</sup> August 2018**

**Readings:**            2 Samuel 11: 26 - 12: 13a;            Psalm 51: 1-12;  
                                 Ephesians 4: 1-6;                            John 6: 24-35.

*"A Question of Faith"*

#### **A Twitch Upon the Thread**

A dilemma that has recurred down through the history of the church has been the question: do we come to understand because of our faith or do we come to faith because of our understanding?

In the past five hundred years, since the Reformation, protestants have tended to argue that we need understanding first (which comes from a plain reading of the Bible), whereas the catholic position has been to hold to the primacy of faith. Classical Anglicanism has tried to place itself somewhere in between the extreme reformed and catholic positions – advocating both faith and reason together.

This faith/reason quandary can be found in Evelyn Waugh's mid-twentieth century novel *Brideshead Revisited*. The two main characters are Sebastien Flyte, a troubled catholic younger son of a marquess, and Charles Ryder, a middle-class only-son who was raised a protestant but had become an atheist.

Ryder put his position in this especially damning way:

*"I had no religion. I was taken to church weekly as a child, and at school attended daily, but, as though in compensation, from the time I went to my public school I was excused church in the holidays. The view implicit in my education was that the basic narrative of Christianity had long been exposed as a myth, and that opinion was now divided as to whether its ethical teaching was of present value, a division in which the main weight went against it; religion was a hobby which some people professed and others did not; at the best it was slightly ornamental, at the worst it was the province of 'complexes' and 'inhibitions' - catch words of the decade – and of the intolerance, hypocrisy, and sheer stupidity attributed to it for centuries..."*

(Waugh E, *Et in Arcadia Ego - Brideshead Revisited*, 1945)

Charles Ryder's problem was that, to him, religion made no sense, whereas his friend Sebastien was captivated by its beauty and fearful of its spiritual demands but had no thought for its logic or theology. Ryder fought against religion through to the conclusion of the novel. But in the end, he finally turned toward it through the combined effects of having lived a tragic and meaningless life, and the beauty he encountered when revisiting the Brideshead Chapel later in life during the war.

### **The Mystery of Eucharist**

Interestingly, the faith/understanding dilemma is present now in this liturgy of Eucharist. In this service:

- We gather as God's people to participate in a spiritual community,
- We are then engaged with the words of Scripture and the understandings that they bring,
- Next, we are spiritually nourished through the mystery of the sacrament of Communion, and finally
- We are sent out as a renewed people to be a blessing to the wider world.

In all of this, we are being engaged intellectually, emotionally and spiritually by the activities before us. Are we, then, increasing in our understanding so that we might grow in faith, or are we being nourished in our faith so that we might grow in understanding, or is it a bit of both – in the best Anglican tradition?

One way of appreciating this liturgy of thanksgiving, (which we call the Eucharist), is through the movement toward and away from God that is symbolically expressed within it. We move toward God by entering the building, and prayerfully encountering the Scriptures and the Sacrament; and God also moves toward us in this process. This is especially the case when God receives what we have to offer (the bread and wine) and returns it to us blest, transformed and ready to nourish us spiritually.

In this process of approach and blessing we, like the bread and wine, are transformed, made new creations and empowered to be Christ to the world. For that too is the mystery, as the church (or people of God) we are called to be the body or presence of Christ in the world today. In other words, we the people of God are called to be a sacramental presence to others – an experience of God's grace and nourishment for others.

This is difficult to understand logically, and it is for this reason we consider symbols (including music, poetry and art) to be important, because they communicate meaning at a depth that ordinary words cannot do. The liturgy also emphasises the idea of 'gift', which is the receiving of something without having done anything to deserve it. Finally, the liturgy affirms the importance of relationships both with God and each other, which is a subjective way of knowing rather than an objective one.

We therefore accept that we can ‘know’ things in different ways; which, when it comes to art, music, literature, relationships and faith, is an expressly subjective way of knowing because we are part of that which is both experienced and observed.

### **God Comes to Humanity in Jesus**

The Bible describes God as Creator, and therefore existing outside of the creation; but it also describes God as being present in creation working through people. This is seen in both the activities of the prophets, priests and kings of the Old Testament, as well as the apostles, pastors and teachers of the New.

Through the history and experiences of the Hebrew people in the old Testament, we can see how they came to understand more and more God’s active presence in the world in special ways. This culminated with the story of God entering the world in the person of Jesus – a human being filled with the spirit of God. Like our liturgy, this is also about movement toward and away from God.

God enters the world in Jesus and people respond by moving toward Jesus, both physically and metaphorically. In today’s Gospel reading, having fed the five thousand, Jesus moved on to another place, but the crowds followed him. Jesus suspected that they wanted more food but instead of supplying their material wants he directed them to the symbolic meaning of the feeding. He said:

*“Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.”* (John 6: 27)

The dialogue then went back and forth between Jesus and the others about what is eternal life, its sign, and how people are to attain it. It ends with Jesus saying to them:

*“I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”* (John 6: 35)

Just as in our liturgy, Jesus here directed his listeners to the symbolic language of metaphor, by which they might come to know the mystery of God coming to his people. This is not the rationalist language of logic, but rather that of poetry and relationship. Hence, in this instance, faith leads to understanding.

### **Every Phrase and Every Sentence is an End and a Beginning**

Anglicans have shaped the liturgy to be a blend of symbol and word, of faith and reason, and of revelation and exploration. One does not exist without the other and when the complete consort dances together a wholesome expression of the Christian faith is created.

To this end, most of the words in the Eucharistic liturgy are from Scripture; but are coupled with the sensual additions of music, colour, movement, incense, touch and taste to make it more tangible and experiential.

This liturgy is also a work of theology that seeks to give expression to the following:

- A revelation of the person of Jesus and his work of salvation,
- The providing of a continuum in the understanding of salvation history from the beginnings of the Hebrew Scriptures, through the New Testament, and on up to the present times,
- A statement of what is believed and practised by Christians, and
- An experience of Christian community in our midst.

Worship is where we start on our journey of faith (at Baptism), it is where we are nurtured (in Word and Sacrament), and it is where we end (in the funeral held after death). It is a journey of growth and transformation, that we may become the people that God wants us to be.

So, I close with a prayer from an earlier time, when our church used to pray:

*We do not presume to come to this thy Table, O merciful Lord,  
trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies.  
We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table.  
But thou art the same Lord, whose property is always to have mercy:  
Grant us therefore, gracious Lord,  
so, to eat the flesh of thy dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood,  
that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body,  
and our souls washed through his most precious blood,  
and that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us. Amen.*

(Prayer of Humble Access, *Book of Common Prayer*, 1662)