Sermon for 21st in Ordinary Time Year B

Readings: 1 Kings 8:1,6,10-11; Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:56-69

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The ark of the covenant is the box in which the two tablets of stone on which Moses carved the 10 Commandments are kept. In today’s first reading the holiest object is placed in the holiest part of the holiest building by the holiest people.

These tangible objects, ark, temple and priest have a sacramental dimension to them – in that their outward physical presence are signs of an inward and intangible spiritual reality. They speak of the proximity and the approachability of God – whilst the reference to the cloud of God’s glory in verses 10-11 – is a reminder that despite the visibility and tangibility of sacramental objects, ceremonies and people, God remains mystery. No earthly thing can fully contain our mighty God.

The ultimate sacrament, of course, is the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the tangible, visible, audible sacrament of the invisible mystery of God the Father:

The Son is the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation (Colossians 1:15).

This is the nature of the invitation and challenge Jesus poses to those who wish to follow him in John 6. Is Jesus the bread that comes from heaven? Do the disciples believe that receiving Jesus into your very self in the same way as eating food becomes part of one’s very body and being is the only way to have true life?

Jesus is saying to those who followed him looking for more bread and fish such as they had received in the miraculous feeding of the five thousand (John 6:1-15) that they should not look for more physical food from him, but spiritual food which is what the gifts were intended to betoken.

‘The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life’ says Jesus (John 6:63). This does not mean that physical gifts and the physical world are of no importance or that they are evil in some way, but that to live solely at the physical level leads ultimately to death.

God created the world and said that it was good. The very project of salvation is to redeem the whole of creation (see Romans 8:22ff), not just human beings and God promises a new heaven and a new earth and a new resurrection body, not a mystical absorption into some ethereal, spiritual cloud.

Those who were unwilling to look beneath the superficial physical level of reality turned away from Jesus at this point. They were all for Jesus if he could provide them with fish and bread, but they were not prepared to make the deeper and existential commitment of placing their absolute trust in him in the promise of receiving heavenly food which would never leave them spiritually hungry again.

Peter managed to hold on – albeit by the skin of his teeth by the sound of it when he exclaimed: ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God’.

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We are used to thinking of sacraments in rather a narrow sense. Catholics speak of seven sacraments, Protestants of two – baptism and Eucharist, but sacrament can also be understood in a broader sense. This is the sense in which the ark of the covenant, temple and priest can be said to be sacramental in our first reading: they point beyond their physical reality to a deeper invisible spiritual reality.

A few weeks ago I was with Catholic colleagues as they celebrated Mass before the tomb of St Peter in the crypt of the basilica in Rome. I then enjoyed my second visit around the back of that holy site to view the burial remains of St Peter more closely. I could not imagine how even the most stony-hearted Protestant could fail to be moved by such a location.

I know from my own Methodist tradition the powerful feeling of standing in Wesley’s pulpit in the New Rooms in Bristol, in Alnwick or Yarm chapels. We all instinctively know what it feels like to encounter the sacramental, even if our doctrine speaks in a much more restricted way of such matters.

Increasingly, Methodists along with some other traditions have begun to speak of the Church as sacramental in this broader sense. I quote from the 2006 Methodist-Catholic International Report: *The Grace Given You in Christ:*

The Church is indeed a visible reality; its visibility is essential to its nature and mission. But there is more to the Church than meets the eye, and only the eye of faith can discern its deepest reality, its invisible mystery (§47)…It is rooted in St Paul’s use of the Greek word *mysterion* to express God’s hidden plan of salvation now revealed in the incarnate Christ…The Greek word *mysterion* was eventually rendered by *sacramentum* in Latin translations of the Bible and in Latin patristic writings. The Church, the creation of the Word of God, is “the ‘mystery’ or ‘sacrament’ of God’s love for the world” (quoted from the Methodist report *Called to Love and Praise*). The invisible and the visible come together, and the former is made known through the latter (§48).

Ephesians 6: 10-20 is trying to express such sentiments. To speak of ‘spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realm’ (v12) is no easy thing today because of the resolutely narrow empiricism of the post-Enlightenment western world view on the one hand, and on the other hand, an array of bizarre religious crazies who inhabit a medieval world of devils, demons and magic.

Both world views lie at the extreme; Western post-Enlightenment empiricism may have benefited the world hugely in terms of material advancement, but as the neo-liberal Western culture begins to totter, even in the West we are beginning to see the terrible price we have paid for such progress in terms of the loss of our human spirit and sense of place and purpose in creation.

Fundamentalist religious fanaticism equally likes to portray itself as the only true view of reality. Both forms of thought are arbitrarily restrictive and shut out too much of the true mystery of existence.

Ephesians argues that spiritual forces are at work against you coming to see the truth of God and finding salvation. There’s a bit more stacked up against the Church than Sunday shopping. The weapons we must use, therefore, are spiritual, rather than physical.

Our spiritual armour comprises peace, truth, faith, justice and the only attacking weapon is the Word of the Spirit which, as we read in Hebrews 4:12, is ‘sharper than any two-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow’.

If you are privileged to have plenty of money and live in a safe country which enjoys the rule of law, as most of our western democracies are, then living as if the visible, tangible world is the only world may be enough. But if you’re a drug-addicted, unemployed, single parent in some favela where you fear a knock on the door at night, then the world is not enough. Only living within the greater reality of eternal hope, justice, truth and love can meet your deepest needs.

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