

Homily for the Fifth Sunday of Easter (Year A), 17th/18th May 2014

People strike us in different ways. Depending on our mind-set we can be critical and judgemental, or we can be more “Christian” and be more accommodating to others. One of my favourite quotes from contemporary theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar is: “we (human beings) are not separate, discrete entities... but *Sympathisers*”. And to unpack that, it involves seeing ourselves as weak sinners, and recognising sympathetically and empathetically the same in each other. Such sympathy is a good basis for recognising the good qualities of others too, and so from this mind-set we are able to be at the same time realistic and positive. And from such a way of thinking we can frequently meet people in whom we recognise the face of Christ (the more people we do, I suspect, the further down the line of being Christ-like we are). These are the people who for us contain a real, powerful and effective spark of the Divine.

And occasionally we meet extra-ordinary people who strike us extraordinarily in their likeness to Jesus. They don’t frighten us because, whatever their power, they are on our side and supporting us. They could be shrewd and wise, they could be humble and accepting, they could be powerful leaders among us. Such people draw us and attract us and we want to be their friend, or simply admire them from afar.

This was the effect that Jesus had on his followers during his lifetime. I don’t think Peter and Andrew by the lakeside mending their nets when they saw and heard this man Jesus said to themselves: “Here is the Divine One”. Much more likely they said: “This is a fine man, I’m curious, Let me follow”. It was as a man, a powerfully impressive man, that Jesus gained his first followers, just in the same way as today such a man as Jesus walking our streets, preaching in our churches and befriending the poor would gain our respect, affection and attention.

In today’s gospel, however, Jesus says something which is often quoted by preachers and writers and those discussing the Gospels week by week: “To have seen me, Philip, is to have seen the Father.” What an extraordinary claim – this man deserves to die for blaspheming! And yet he is telling the truth!

Let me digress. This is Saint John’s Gospel, the last to be written, in the final decade of the first century between the year 90 and 100. The church has grown, it has reached Rome and Britain even, and has probably reached as far east as India. This gospel writer was known throughout the Middle Ages as John the

Divine i.e. John the Theologian. His gospel is John thinking and writing about the relationship of Jesus and God long after the event. He is recording where Christian thinking about the faith has reached at that time.

And what he is recognising in this passage of conversation encapsulates the truth that Jesus, to use an expression by a modern theologian, “is the Sacrament of God”. He is the one in human form, who by the power with which he represents God himself, becomes for us the presence of God himself. He expresses his power, his wisdom and his all-encompassing love.

John’s call is for us to approach the invisible, spirit, all-pervading God through his earthly emissary, Jesus. “To have seen me is to have seen the Father”, and this Jesus is a man just like you and me. He is uniquely divine, whereas we have only aspects of the divine in our humanity. May the man Jesus lead us to his heavenly Father through the power of his Spirit.