

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Faithful To The Flesh

The word “covenant” is very important to our religion throughout its history. God makes a covenant with us. It’s shaky and often falls on our part, but God is faithful, and never changes his commitment to us.

“The Flesh Is Weak.”

We have quite high authority for the above statement; Jesus says it in the Garden of Gethsemane. Maybe we’ve accepted the statement insensitively. We’ve seen times since the words were spoken, when the poor old flesh took a mighty hammering from great spiritual leaders like St Augustine, himself certainly influenced by centuries of hatred for the body, as expressed by pagan philosophers. And why shouldn’t a deep thinker lose patience with the body? From his point of view it’s a wretched interfering nuisance, always interrupting the musings of its owner with undignified demands for movement, self-defence, medicine, fresh air, food, new clothes and shoes, trips to the comfort-station, and having a family; all of the above, in the eyes of a Greek thinker, embarrassing signs of weakness and dependency. Augustine had a deeper dislike of it; it was, as St Paul had told him, the seat of enslavement to sin and death, and Augustine had close experience of both.

What God Thinks

This contempt for the body is never holy. When the Holy Spirit was teaching the Jews to believe, he gave them an awed respect for the wonder of the body. *I thank you for the wonder of my being*, says the Psalmist, *for I am wonderfully made*. He also taught them to see physical needs as a point of contact with God: God feeds us, he creates the spaces of the world, of the universe: he himself rides the heavens, and is always expressing himself in the world of real things. His miraculous masterpiece is human beings: body, mind, spirit: Hebrew faith delighted to find its celebrations around the table, the marriage-bed, the birth and growth of children, pilgrimage, and the holy place. You can hear in the Bible the beating of human hearts, and the rhythm of breathing. For God, it seems, bodies are not impenetrable to spirit. This is our faith too. We celebrate, in the Incarnation, the Word becoming Flesh. In the summer we celebrate the feast of the Body and Blood of Christ. At every Mass we greet the sacredness of the body, as we remember

the words of Jesus: *This is my body, given for you: my blood poured out for your forgiveness.*

Word Becomes Flesh

Incarnation means that *God forges an eternal covenant with our flesh*. The thing about us which looked like causing our downfall – the starving, lusty, warring, demanding, suffering, failing, dying *flesh* - is married by the Son of God, and in that moment God raises the flesh to divine life. The total shock of this makes Christmas endlessly fresh. When Samuel looked for someone to anoint as King, Jesse of Bethlehem brought his eldest son, tall and handsome; *rejected!* Then the next: *rejected!* The true King was the youngest, the littlest brother, the disregarded David. Similarly, we thought our salvation would come through the glories of intellect, or the heights of the spiritual. That would have sorted the men from the boys; most of us would have been left on the shelf. Instead, God laid the path of life in the flesh, which is so very present in each of us: or, to say it better, *in which each of us is present*. When Jesus addressed his Gospel, it was not to the holy or the devout, but to the sick and the sinful. *You don’t need a halo for this*, he says: *just be human*. It’s not only something for which I qualify: it’s something for which *everyone* qualifies: he is sent to all who are alive.

God So Loved The Flesh....

If God travelled so far to save the body, we must learn the same respect for it. Time and again the Church has agreed with the Greeks and despised the body. How many have been repelled from such a Gospel? How many have swallowed it, and lived fractured human lives because of it? For shame! Reach out to comfort it, feed it, and heal it; welcome it and honour it with this beautiful feast! By doing the deeds of generosity for the poor, we thank God for the seven sacraments, which lift up what we have battered, dispossessed, and left for dead, and carry it to the inn, and pour oil and wine into its wounds, and pay for its recovery!

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