

ΚΟΙΝΟΝΙΑ

SHARING

Talk on the Fourth Day, after breakfast

Today's word is the abstract noun from κοινός, which means "common". By now, you will probably have cottoned on to the general direction I am following in these talks, and perhaps you will be discovering a general trend in your own meditations, and you will recognize in the today's value of *community* or *sharing* a further call for the deacons, in concert with everyone else who is a Christian, to set *what is shared* above *what is selfish* in their order of priorities. But we must be unselfish for the right reasons, and in the right way: not simply obliterating ourselves in personal terms, in some suicidal attempt to disappear from the face of the earth, but making room in ourselves by a mature obedience, so that Jesus Christ, who is most needed by the world, may be in us to unite, and guide, and teach the Church. So let us look at this word: we are in the region of *sharing, community, and communion*.

We say that something *valueless* is *common* – as in the phrase *a common thief*, or about some unsophisticated Nottingham girl, *she's that Common*. We also speak of whatever unites people as being common, as in *a common language*, or something *common to all, the common lot of humankind*. Finally, we think of our future prospects as a uniting factor when we create a *commonwealth* – a community of interests. Exactly the same range attaches to the Greek word in its ancient secular use; and this can encourage us to think about the word as something we use and know already.

The closeness of two concepts so potentially diverse as to be almost contradictory is instructive: the possibility that "the community" (κοινωνία) may refer to the body of Christ, which is the salvation of the world, is at one end of the scale: at the other end, "what's common" (κοινός) may refer to something contemptible and without value. We experience exactly the same range of response when the Gospel is proclaimed, *and always have*:

Here are we, preaching a crucified Christ: to the Jews, an obstacle they cannot get over, to the Greeks madness, but to those who have been called, whether Jews or Greeks, a Christ who is the power and wisdom of God.

Here are the most precious mysteries of the faith, being held as such by some, and being dismissed as worthless by the world. Let us consider the concept of *common sense*, which is a valuable and powerful force for the uniting of many individuals – an indispensable characteristic, we may feel, for any minister, or anyone who wants to help in building up community or family. The attempt within, say, a family to impose things which are not *commonsensical* tends to divide rather than unite; the imposition of silly rules on teenagers, for instance. In the Church's terms this can cut both ways. We *do* have areas where we are obliged to set the Church apart from the world at large, calling on the members of Christ's body to part company with their world. There it's essential that we take care to build up a powerful

common understanding *within* the κοινότητα, so that the specifically Christian value becomes a force for sharing, rather than a force for division. This basic work is often neglected, with the result that we end up promulgating some value which the members of the community simply do not share; and then we tend to rot the κοινότητα, and force its members to reunite with the commonsense world we tried to make them leave: rather as teenagers may have to decide between staying within an “oppressive” family, or escaping into a world which seems to offer freedom.

The Gospel does not permit us to consign people to paganism over trivia. Jesus himself drew the line of what was essential – in his statement in Jn 6, for example, about *his having come down from heaven*. He was prepared to see the departure of people who could not accept this statement, because he knew it was an absolute necessity for their faith in him: without it, they could not claim to be part of the κοινότητα. To have withdrawn the demand would have been to warp the true nature of the κοινότητα, and this would have destroyed the church before its inception. We can find the same necessity wherever Jesus uses the word “Unless...” (...a man be born again...you become like little children...you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood...I wash you). There are essentials, without which we cannot “have the mind of Christ”. I grew up in a Church where an unguarded sausage roll on a Friday, coupled with the proverbial road accident, could send you to Hell with almost Islamic certainty. That, I now see, was a notion totally lacking in common sense, and one which I cannot connect with Christ in any convincing way, and one which I could not propose to my teenage children without losing their trust in a big way.

As ministers, however, it is our responsibility to have the “common sense” of the Church; and as people who have read the Scriptures, we know that this often has to be differentiated from the common sense of humanity in general. The place where this is most clearly set out is the First Letter to the Corinthians, *where the consciousness of being the body of Christ* is set against two things: firstly

- the self-awareness of the pagan world, “which is coming to its end”, and secondly,
- the separate instincts and awarenesses of individuals who are behaving not as their membership of Christ demands, but according to what Paul calls “the flesh”.

Here is Paul addressing the Corinthians (1Cor 2:12ff):

The Spirit we have received is not the spirit of the world, but God’s own Spirit, so that we may understand the gifts God has so freely given us. It is of these we speak: not in the terms learnt from human philosophy, but in terms learnt from the Spirit, fitting spiritual language to spiritual things. The natural person (ψυχικός δε άνθρωπος) has no room for the gifts of God’s Spirit; to him they are folly; he cannot recognize them, because their value can only be assessed in the Spirit. The spiritual person (πνευματικός), on the other hand, can assess the value of everything, and his own value cannot be assessed by anyone else; for *who has ever known the mind of the Lord? Who has ever been his counsellor?* But we are those who have the mind of Christ.

There is full warranty here for our *differing* from the common sense of mankind, when that is considered as “unspiritual”, which is the real meaning of ψυχικός,

translated “natural” above; and that is a judgment, clearly, which can only be made insofar as we are guided by the Spirit of God, which is also described here as “the mind of Christ” (νοῦς Χριστοῦ). What we must beware of is the *claim* to be acting in accord with the mind of Christ being used to justify all kinds of unspiritually-motivated notions, of a sort which are destructive of religion. Paul describes such “missed marks” in the Letter to the Romans (7:5ff):

While we were still living by our natural inclinations (lit. *in the flesh*), the sinful passions aroused by the Law were working in all parts of our bodies to make us live lives fruitful only for death.

Note that such a disaster could only happen to someone actively involved in *organized* religion – in this case, an observant Jew.

But now we are released from the Law, having died to what was binding us, and so we are in a new service, that of the Spirit, and not in the old service of a written code.

(7:14ff) We are well aware that the Law is spiritual: but I am fleshly, being sold under sin. I do not understand my own behaviour: I do not act as I mean to, but do the things I hate. Even while I am acting as I do not want to, I still acknowledge the goodness of the Law: so it is not I who act, but sin living in me. And truly I know of no good living in me – in my natural self (lit. *in my flesh*) – for to wish, is in me, but not to work goodness. What I do is not the good that I want, but the evil that I don’t want. But if I do what I don’t want to, it is not I who act, but indwelling sin.

Clearly we ourselves stand in a certain amount of danger here. If we set off about our sacred tasks as ministers *without the mind of Christ*, it will scarcely happen that we do well by accident. Yet it may well be that we shall gather sufficient like-minded “worldlings” about us that we make our shortcomings invisible even to ourselves. It takes massive devotion to cleanse the mind and heart of what Paul calls “worldly”, “fleshly” and “natural” considerations; especially as the authorities which welcome them and validate them may sometimes be highly-placed. It isn’t just corrupt |Renaissance Popes who obey the laws of the flesh and the world. The history of the Church gleams with the scarlet of such times: a good number of the papacies, the Inquisitions, the anathemas, the Crusades, the persecuting condemnations of science and wisdom of all kinds, the absurdities of some pieces of teaching, the excommunications, the choices of conclaves and chapters, dare I say even some canonizations have beautifully encapsulated the spirit of the world and of their times, whilst signally failing to express the mind of Christ. It is where the powers of the world penetrate to our hearts and takes possession of our minds that we find the guiding force of the Holy Spirit weak and distant. It is often hard to tell when it has happened to us.

In this way you can see how the obedience we owe to the κοινωνία is not fulfilled when *all men* – even the whole Church community - *speak well of us*, but only when we are at one with the mind of Christ; and this loyalty to Christ may be in the teeth of the whole world and a good part of the visible Church. I always thank God for people like Franz Jaeggerstater, who refused to lend his aid to Hitler’s army, in the teeth of the opposition of his own family, his own priest, and his own national Church leaders. He died for his refusal, and his disobedience is one of the very few precious consolations for the Church, as it ruefully contemplates the disastrous obedience so many Catholics, at every level, gave to Adolf Hitler.

A retreat like this is a good place for us to test whether we are seeking the right kind of obedience for ourselves. A *servant of the unspiritual* can probably organize earthly reality better than many saints – including the proverbial visit to a brewery -

but only a servant of the Spirit can truly gather the *κοινωνία*. So we should ask ourselves the question Paul asks the Galatians (1: 10):

So now, who am I trying to please – man, or God? Would you say it is other people's approval I am looking for? If I still wanted that, I should not be what I am – a *δουλος* of Christ.

So what are we to conclude from this short meditation?

I would suggest that most irreligious people think entering the Catholic Church involves a kind of spiritual lobotomy, creating zombie-like apparatchiks who mouth the shibboleths of the authorities or endless lines of half-chewed Scripture – mostly anathematic. They will also expect ministers to be, if not as crude as that, at least fanatics for political correctness, toeing the party line in all things, and even surrendering their own independence of thought in favour of what someone safe like a Vatican spokesman says.

The point is that belonging to the Church gives us no warrant to evade the duty to seek our own personal encounter with the living Christ, and to live in his presence each day: and then the duty to think, to pray, and to believe – at whatever personal cost. When we meet people in our role as ministers, we must appear to them, not as the blank wall upon which Vatican position-papers are pasted, but as people who are beside them in their doubts and fears, their struggle for faith, hope, and love. The *κοινωνία* is brought into being, and reinforced, and promoted by the *exactitude* of this sharing. That is why Jesus *became what we are* in the Incarnation, and *remains what we are* in his glorified life – even carrying the wounds of the Cross inflicted by a Roman soldier with hammer and nails, into eternity. Our encounter with the unchurched, the ill-educated, the alienated, the lapsed, the wounded will demand that we show the badge of identity *with them* which Christ wins by his obedience to the Cross. We will do nothing but harm if we replace that approach with something of our own, something which comes easier to us – such as:

- a hail-fellow-well-met bonhomie, the matiness which passes for friendliness but may really cover indifference or
- the official approach which stresses titles, or clerical collars, and reaches for text-books or liturgical forms, because we are afraid to reveal ourselves or
- a distant formality as a cloak for distaste and approval alike, the fear of becoming involved, the peril which real encounter means for the individual.
- an improper intimacy, which offends against virtue, and seeks to fuel “pastoral care” with the enormous powers of selfishness;
- a wholesale kidnapping of the situation, using each situation as a theatre in which to express ourselves and enjoy our performance at the expense of the Church.

All of these tempting alternatives threaten the real possibility of creating *κοινωνία*. Insofar as we fail to copy Christ in his closeness and openness, governing each relationship with the holiness which flows from union with the Father, we will not lose the power to build a community: but it will be a structure not aligned on Christ, and far from merely failing to contribute to the coming of the Kingdom, it will positively lead astray the little ones, and damage the Church whose name it still bears, and we shall incur some of the most violent verdicts Jesus ever uttered – the ones involving *a millstone*, and *the depths of the sea*.