

Sermon Patronal Festival. St.Margarets Day 2020

Isaiah.43.1-2, Romans 8.31-39, St.Matthew 16.24-26.

Minding the Gap.

What a contrast this year's patronal weekend is with last? Last year for our centenary we had that lovely day of garden teas, folk orchestra, festival mass, bishop, neighbours and friends, the hog roast and course the fireworks from the roof, not to mention the home made wine – or perhaps I should omit that! This year our gathering will be less in numbers and not as outwardly colourful or social. The embracing of old friends and some new will not flow from the inner heart to the outer body. The gardens will be open for you to chat and mingle in a safe and distanced way for those gathered and yet probably more will join us virtually via the internet or else just quietly at home with their own thoughts and prayers. In all this I'm reminded constantly of the tube warning – ***Mind the Gap!*** Many of us face huge gaps in our lives. When we stop minding them we really are in trouble.

The heart of our life of faith is sacramental - that is God makes himself known in flesh and blood in Jesus fully in the incarnation. He shares our life that we may come to fully know and share his. Our reflection last year on the role of Antioch the city of our patron saint, in the life of the early church, was crucial to understanding our calling to biblical and sacramental cohesion.

Following and embodying the word made flesh was not easy for Margaret. We should not underestimate how difficult it is today. It is hard not only in the secular world but also within the Church which, whilst rightly reminding us that the church is about people and not things, can glide into an iconoclast mentality. Our faith can falsely be reduced to spirit, mind and words. Jesus did not share our lives from a distanced spiritual pedestal he entered the very stuff and physicality of our whole being.

We, as orthodox catholic Christians within the Anglican tradition, in common with our ancestors of Antioch believe in the redemption and raising up of the whole person – body mind and spirit. Some parts of our church seem to have lost faith and resilience in this time of crisis and pandemic in the power of the word made flesh and sacrament. The outwardly and visible signs of inner grace. Things that matter most are the things that connect us to what we inwardly love most. If you think it not so - throw your wedding ring down the drain.

God shares our matter *because* we matter. God creates out of love, not a spiritual stage but a world of matter and we have a special physical responsibility within it. Our faith is not just spiritual but embodied. This embodiment is at the heart of our worship, following Jesus's command ordinary bread and wine is taken and becomes also the very substance of Christ himself to feed us. We are fed as the body of Christ, and enabled to embody the church in mission. At the end of mass we are dismissed to go

out and be not just spiritual hands eyes feet ears and so on but real people praying, doing and embodying real things for the sake of others.

Our virtual engagement can and is most helpful. It is helpful in encouraging a spiritual communion, in reminding us of what we have received in reality and also, hard though it is, a helpful a reminder of the gap - what we do not have. The photograph of a loved one is not the same but its presence may assist in thanksgiving for the love that flows from the real person now absent perhaps through geography or even death. Remembrance for Christians is a physical not just a spiritual matter. As written in our booklet for a couple of weeks:

Our lives have been changed by the experience of the pandemic and it is clear that we cannot simply return to how things were before. We must remain centred on the Lord Jesus and His command at the Last Supper to “do this in remembrance of me.” We will rebuild what it means to be a Eucharistic community, while at the same time exploring creative ways to meet changed circumstances.

At this patronal festival we face challenges to our faith that Margaret may have thought as hard as any instrument of torture and death. She embodied the call of Christ to take up the cross, to discover a truer and fuller identity by dying to the stuff that didn't matter.

We probably think her lot a hugely difficult and painful task too hard and heavy for us to bear. However, she and other martyrs and saints managed because no task or command from Jesus is too hard when understood he not only has embodied that task on the cross but also helps to carry it out. He is the one who says *my yoke is easy and my burden light*. He is not divine virtually or spiritually, but in flesh and blood. We need to bring all of our bodily selves, appropriate to our stage and condition of life, to God: our minds our talents, our sight, smell, hearing taste and yes - however we can - our touch too, to embody the body of Christ. As we bring bread and wine we recall how he opened his arms for us on the cross and perhaps we will think of those we wish to physically open our arms to but cannot.

Unlike God in Christ, we cannot do this in all places, with all people and at all times but even most of us will have God given opportunities to do so with some people in some places and at some times - albeit in a more limited and restricted way at this time. Any virtual or distanced reminder of the limitations is painful, but in helping us to mind the gap it can be a Godly place and holiness may be found.

There is a danger of losing heart at times – we can all relate to that, and yet listen to the hope of St.Pauls words amidst all the aching physical gaps in his life from those he loves: *nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ*. What Christ has brought together in his body has the power to transform any gaps we create for ourselves or

have thrust upon us. Transform does not mean disappear – Christ’s wounds are not rubbed out by the resurrection they are integral to his risen body.

The words of our opening hymn are powerful because they remind us of the saints who so often lived with absence of human love, of liberty and understanding. It is not that God spiritually fills the gaps – he does not. The holy life makes us mindful of them, transforms them and uses them. At the very least we are mindful of human limitation and mindful of what matter matters most in life. In the gap the physical and spiritual can become one.

I want to finish by using the words of a more modern martyr than Margaret – Dietrich Bonhoeffer. From his prison awaiting Nazi Execution, separated from the people and things he loved so very deeply and that reminded him of Divine love he wrote:

It is wrong to say that God fills the emptiness. God in no way fills it but much more leaves it precisely unfilled and thus helps us preserve—even in pain—the authentic relationship. Furthermore, the more beautiful and fuller the remembrances, the more difficult the separation. But gratitude transforms the torment of memory into silent joy. One bears what was lovely in the past not as a thorn but as a precious gift deep within, a hidden treasure of which one can always be certain.

Whether you are here, at home or elsewhere, be mindful of the Godly gaps – treasure them and remember that we are a Eucharistic community, a community of thanksgiving, of hope and love. Have the confidence of St.Paul that nothing will separate you from that hope and love in Christ. In such hope and love we may look forward to another day of thanksgiving with Margaret, Paul, Dietrich and all the saints – a day which will make sense of all the gaps which will then be no more.

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St.Margaret of Antioch
Leigh-on-Sea July 19th 2020