

Performance Christianity!

Exodus 16^{2-4,9-15}; Psalm 78²³⁻²⁹; Ephesians 4¹⁻¹⁶; John 6²⁴⁻³⁵

What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? [John 6³⁰]

If only Jesus could be persuaded to do miracles to order! What a difference that would make to the mission and reputation of the Church, of our reputations as Christians. But even if that were remotely possible – that we could feed 5000 people in Handsworth Park from a bag of crisps and a tin of sardines; that we could become as proficient at turning water into wine as we are at turning wine into water; or that the hem of my cassock led to the closure of the Accident & Emergency Unit at City Hospital – it wouldn't making any lasting dent in attendance figures or Confirmations! Performance Christianity gathers spectators rather than disciples.

In the verses before we join John's Gospel, Jesus has fed 5000 people and then they wouldn't let him escape: do another trick for us, Jesus! They don't want an explanation that Jesus saying, **I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty**, is a metaphor for satisfied spiritual hunger and thirst. They stick with their appeal: **What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? MAKE IT ABOUT ME, JESUS, NOT YOU!** That has been happening in the Church – the CofE is now obsessed with statistics and performance religion!

One of the less attractive traits in people of faith (alongside the self-centredness that wants it to be about them) is that they can have a short memory: it shows a lack of maturity. That was certainly the case amongst the Hebrews who had forgotten the miracles associated with the escape from Egypt – the Passover itself, the passing through the Red Sea, etc – were soon forgotten as **the whole congregation complained – if only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt**, comparing the memory of the **fleshpots** to their current **hunger**. How easily we fall into the same trap – of forgetting what God has done for us in calling us to faith and forgiving us and allowing that to be eclipsed by current and temporary difficulties.

Maturity – according to Paul – arrives when our priority is **to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called**. Instead of complaining, it is a life of **humility, gentleness, patience, love and maintaining unity**. We belong in **one body** and this celebrates the life in God – **one Lord, one faith, one baptism**.

Recognising this turns us around from what we can get to focus on what we can give in service of **one Lord, one faith, one baptism**. Using the **gifts** God has given us we devote ourselves to the **work of ministry** and to **building up the body of Christ**.

I quote at length from The Rt Hon & The Rt Revd Dr Richard Chartres, previously a very distinguished Bishop of London, reflecting on the issues the body of Christ faces today.

There is a malaise which even afflicts some priests who seem to have no idea of who or what they are; no clear idea of what they are trying to do or why they are trying to do it. This has tempted some to describe aspects of our church tradition including priestly ordination as “key limiting factors” as they search to connect with “young people”.

It is true that we have been overtaken by very rapid social change in which we can expect the Holy Spirit to reshape the Church. As an era in which perhaps we felt too much at home, passes away, it is right to look expectantly for the living forms that Jesus and his Church will take in the Christian centuries to come.

But alongside this proper expectancy there is an insidious temptation to believe that we can abbreviate the birth pangs of the new age by drastic surgery when we really don't have the spiritual insight to understand what we are doing. It seems to me that we are in particular danger of reducing the Christ given sacramental character of the Church to a thin and insubstantial sociological concept.

The Church worthy of the name is brought into being by baptism and nourished by the eucharist it grows into the place where we can be incorporated as very members of the body of Christ. The reality of the Church is constituted not by the prescriptions of some committee but by the celebration of the transformative eucharist by an ordained priest in the presence of the community of the faithful. The priest is the representative of the Diocesan Bishop and together they are knots in the net which maintains the unity of the church in faithfulness to the teaching of the Apostles. This is how it has been over many centuries and in many different cultures... The Eucharist builds the Church and is not something the Church “puts on” to cater for our religious needs and tastes.

No doubt the impatience with inherited forms reflects a disappointment with so much church life that many people currently experience. It has always been so. The church should be a restorative cell capable of neutralising the cancers that are gnawing at our society but as we know the reality is so often depressingly anaemic. But demolition is no answer.

Andrew Brown, one of the shrewdest commentators on the religious scene in our day, observes that one of the symptoms of extreme hypothermia is the urge to remove all one's clothes even in a blizzard. Panic is a faithless and fruitless response to the challenge we face..."

It isn't in the spectacular ‘performance’ of miracles that Christ is served, but in constant and consistent service and love.