

Easter I (Low Sunday)

receive ye the Holy Ghost (Gospel).

Priests are perhaps rightly cautious about making much of themselves, but to make of the Ministry what the Lord has made of it can hardly be wrong. Indeed, how could it be right to ignore the Lord's teaching and doing?

Liberal theologians, and anti-Christian pundits, would respond by asserting that the Gospel passage is “obviously” constructed by the evangelist to express his own views, which “of course” are not those of the Lord. Those who go down this route have serious problem - what teaching, what deeds, will survive the criticism and why should they be trusted? Is it not all too likely that what survives will be merely what pleases the critic? If Christianity were such obvious rubbish, how did it survive and prosper?

Certainly St. John of all the evangelists is writing a theology, but (I think) not so long after the events, and recollecting details which are not easily invented. C. S. Lewis, in his professional role as a literary scholar, pointed out that the alternative to recollection on his part is a truly gigantic creative effort, anticipating by many centuries the development of the modern novel. This would be even more unlikely than the substantial accuracy of St. John's narrative. In particular, his resurrection stories are just too personal to be invented, and it is not possible to find the point at which the personal recollection turns into the theological statement.

So St. John is convinced that the Resurrection is about spiritual authority. “As the Father has sent me, even so send I you.” (This is not so different from the end of St. Matthew's gospel either - “all power hath been given me in heaven and earth; go ye therefore and make disciples” - so it is not as if St. John is on his own here.) “Sending” has been a major issue throughout the Gospel - does Jesus exercise the authority of his Father or not? Is he a sent man or not? (That is what the word Apostle means.) Amongst many other things, the resurrection is a decisive vindication by the Father of all the claims to authority that Jesus made during his ministry. In particular, he claimed to forgive sins (not, incidentally, by virtue of the Cross but by the authority he had as his Father's Son) and now the Father has shown that he did indeed have that authority.

He has it - and he passes it on to the Apostles, the sent men, and to all others who were to be in the authorised ministry of the Church. They are mistaken who imagine Jesus never envisaged the Church - he could not do other as a faithful Jew than envisage the Great Assembly of the People of God, which is what the Church ought to be. Inevitably, on the pattern of Israel in the wilderness, it would be an *ordered* body, not a rabble.

The declaration of forgiveness of sins which a priest makes in the Absolution is therefore bound up in the Resurrection. These are the needs which we all have, and this is the remedy which God has provided. “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” (and the wise priest always remembers how the passage continues “of whom I am chief”). Christ in his earthly ministry was necessarily limited to the few people he encountered; now (St. John says) his ministers, given his authority with the gift of the Holy Spirit, are the normal channels of forgiveness. Of course God is not limited to the Apostolic Ministry, but that is the provision which He has made and empowered. And that is why it is so dangerous to make changes in that ministry. Needless to say, the authority is given not for self-aggrandisement, but for loyal working out of the Lord's own pattern.