

## Sermon for the Sunday after the Ascension

*“They shall put you out of the synagogues”*

At first sight, this is not a good text for the Sunday before Pentecost. But remember “you must be born again” (which means abandoning your old life). It is natural that the old life will retaliate, and indeed may persecute you. So no bad thing to reflect on the change made for us in baptism, accepted by us in confirmation, and renewed more or less consciously every time we pray, every time we meet for worship, every time we reflect on the gift of the Holy Spirit to us.

Some tidying up of the text may be useful. A synagogue is basically an assembly of Jews, and only secondarily a building in which it meets, if indeed there is one. No Jew in our Lord's time had to belong to a synagogue as part of being a Jew, and it seems that in Jerusalem such assemblies were mainly frequented by visiting Jews (often from other parts of the world) rather than by residents. It is of the nature of such an assembly that it has some limits on who was welcome. We may imagine that Jews who conformed to Greek lifestyle (by disguising their circumcision and going to a gymnasium) were not welcome. Nor were collaborators with Rome. And in Jerusalem, the Jewish authorities (who would hardly attend synagogues themselves as they had quite enough to do in the Temple) would have been afraid of anything that seemed like anti-Roman agitation. This is not a question of legal rules and formal procedures. True, the Greek of the text reads as if this was a standard procedure with a “word for it”, but the word (only found in John) might be a piece of Christian slang. Long after the Lord's time, and some time after the Gospel of John, it seems a synagogue blessing was modified in such a way that it might be thought to curse Christians, but even this is hardly a formal exclusion. No, to be put out of the synagogue is the effect of any one of several informal devices, not excluding extreme violence. They worked – ask Paul!

John and many other early Jewish Christians did not want to be excluded; quite apart from the opportunities for evangelism, they knew that much of Jewish practice and heritage had existed by God's will. But they had been excluded; so a Word of Jesus prophesying that this would happen was reassuring, as was the story of the man born blind in John 9 (which indeed anticipates the terminology). I do not accept that such words or narratives must have been falsified after the event.

We did not want to be excluded. We too believed that Anglicanism had been (albeit imperfectly) of God. It is how we began as Christians. We were not excluded by any formal process, but (in this way like the early Christians) squeezed out by changes in worship and in the ministry, and also now in morals, which meant that the Anglicanism we had known and rightly regarded as a valid form of Catholic Christianity was no longer available to us in the state religion. We believed, as the early Christians believed, that we must worship properly. And so separation has come upon us.

Continuing Anglicanism does not consist in listing the errors of the state religion. We will certainly not be saved by knowing those errors (except in so far as we too have to avoid them). Nor will we be saved merely by knowing what, at its best, Anglicanism had been before the changes. Nor even by trying to continue it, to the very limited extent that we can. Be in no doubt; Article 18 of the 39 is simple truth: “Holy Scripture doth set out unto us only the Name of Jesus Christ, whereby men must be saved”. But still, even if we trust we are saved, we must continue to journey along the Way of Salvation, and the Lord has taught us that it is narrow.

The Gospel indictment is severe. “They have not known the Father, nor me”. To “know” is not merely to have correct factual information about God, it is to experience God as He is. With all the advantages of the Old Covenant, the Jews failed to know the Father and so failed to recognise the Son. With all the advantages of the New Covenant, many have invented a new God in their own image, and so lost the true knowledge of He who Is. We too must beware. We will never be free from that temptation, though it will probably come in a different form. This is a time of trial.

Yet also of promise. For the Lord promised to send the Comforter, the Advocate, who “shall testify of me”. So we will pray next Sunday indeed, but rightly at all times because God is not constrained by our earthly times and seasons:

“Come Holy Ghost our souls inspire, and lighten with celestial fire”.