

I have always had a fascination with people. Even wandering down Grafton Street. So many different people, different backgrounds, there for different reasons; different thoughts going through their minds – everyone different to everyone else. For each human being is unique. There is no other human being on this planet, no-one who has ever lived, no-one who will live in times to come who is, or was, or will be exactly like you. That thought occurred to me as I read the portion from Revelation appointed as our second lesson for today – the vision of the heavenly worship, the voices of myriads of myriads, thousands and thousands, numbers beyond imagination all united in worship:

‘Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might
and honour and glory and blessing!’

¹³Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under
the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing,
‘To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb
be blessing and honour and glory and might
for ever and ever!’

All wonderfully different, all made in the image of God, all coming together in a common purpose of worship.

Of course we are not always comfortable with difference. Difference can give rise to suspicion; can give rise to prejudice, to racism, to sectarianism and all the manifestations of that are so familiar to us all. But we are all wonderfully different and in our difference we can enrich each other. We can be different in our experience and understanding of God. I often reflect on the Indian story of a group of blind men coming up to an elephant. Each were asked to describe their own understanding of what an elephant was like. One who was running his hands over the trunk said, ‘An elephant is like a big rubbery hose.’

Another who was feeling one of the tusks, said ‘No, not at all. An elephant is a big shiny spike.’ A third was holding one of the elephants ears between his hands. He said, ‘You are both wrong; an elephant is like a big leathery leaf.’ If you think about it each of them were right but none had the whole picture. If, instead of disagreeing with each other, maintaining that their particular interpretation was the only one, they had listened to each other, been prepared to learn from each other then they would have enriched each other.

Over the last couple of weeks, as we have reflected on the Gospel accounts of the Resurrection, one underlying theme that has come through for me has been the variety of ways in which the resurrection was experienced – Jesus appearing in their midst as they sheltered behind locked doors, Jesus walking the Emmaus Road initially unrecognised by his fellow travellers. Variety also in the time and ease with which they came to their understanding of Jesus risen. Mary in the garden simply has to hear his voice; those who travelled the Emmaus Road come to that realisation only at the end of the day as he broke bread with them; poor Thomas has to wait a week.

The choice of our Lessons for today speaks of two men with very different faith journeys. We have read of the conversion of Saul. Saul so sure that the embryo Church was wrong, felt called to stamp it out. His encounter with the risen Christ was in the realm of confrontation, drawing out a specific response – Paul from then on could name the day and the hour at which he came to his faith in Christ. We have also read of the reconciliation of Peter with the risen Christ. This was part of Peter’s faith journey, a very different journey to that of Paul. Peter wanted to be faithful to Christ from the very outset and yet knew

his moments of failure. The first to confess Jesus as the Christ – yet when Jesus began to talk of his coming suffering and death he immediately jumped in to contradict – receiving the stinging rebuke – ‘Get behind me Satan.’ Of the disciples it was Peter who followed Jesus as he was lead away to the High Priest’s house from the Garden of Gethsemene – yet when challenged by the servant girl, he denied he ever knew him - followed by that moment of despair as he heard the cock crow. Then there is that lovely scene described in our Gospel reading. Peter’s coming to faith was different to that of Paul, more drawn out, less of the certainty, more of the growing realisation. The important thing is that both came to faith, both were used in the growth of the Church.

I would suspect there are those among us who can identify more closely with Paul, others who will identify more closely with Peter, the rest of us falling some way between the two. Too often in the Church there has been a tendency to dismiss an other’s experience – either too emotional, or too rational. I prefer to see it in terms of God speaking to each person in a way that is appropriate to them. If he had dealt with Paul in the way he dealt with Peter, I suspect he would never have got through – it is almost as if he had to grab him and knock his head against the Damascus Road, ‘Paul, I am talking to you.’ By the same token if he had dealt with Peter the way he dealt with Paul, the odds are he would have broken Peter. God deals with us as individuals, speaks to us in a way that is appropriate to us. I often say the Peter’s need to welcome and celebrate the faith of the Paul’s and the Paul’s need to honour the faith of the Peter’s, simply rejoicing that each has found faith.

Within the life of any Christian community, we need to provide space for each other to explore our faith, to celebrate our faith, to affirm each other in our faith. This brings me back to where I began – with the wonderful diversity of humanity and the vision of John of the worship of the heavenly courts. All wonderfully different, all made in the image of God, all coming together in a common purpose of worship.

May this Parish community, part of the Church on earth, in all our diversity of age, of talents, of worship preferences, of opinions gather around this place to affirm each other, to honour each other, to learn from each other that each may be built up in the faith that together in the life and witness of this place God's name may be honoured and his Kingdom advanced – and all to the glory of God.