

FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT YEAR A

What is it we believe about the Church? Like all questions there is a long answer and a short answer. Each week we stand with confidence and we state that “We believe in One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic church”. That would suffice if we wanted a brief answer to a question on Ecclesiology, or we were ensuring that we remained within a correct doctrinal position as Christians who are concerned with remaining orthodox in our thinking and practice.

But on a more experiential level, as a community both local and universal, when can we say to someone, “Look!” in the sense of “do you see” “look, there is the church, that is what being church looks like.” There are occasions when we can do this, especially when the church, locally or universally, functions by combining the gifts and talents of its people in a spirit of unity, with all its parts working together; then we can say “Look there is the church, there it is in action, in praxis. That is the body of Christ.”

When the church, through a single member or through many of its members, comes to the aid of the sick, or offers forgiveness to the penitent, or goes the extra mile for someone, we can say “Look there is the church.” Then we can call to mind the church as a shepherd caring and tending the flock. Or when the faithful are gathered in prayer or are united with the church in private prayer, or gathered at the altar or making a spiritual communion like so many are at this time, we again can say, “Look there is the church” and we are reminded of our togetherness in the spirit of the living God.

Today is Mothering Sunday and we have the opportunity to draw upon another biblical and traditional model that not only honours motherhood in all its forms, but also to overlay those attributes onto the community of believers, that gives us another way to say “look there is the church.” This model was best expressed by the Church Father Cyprian of Carthage who said, “No one can have God as Father who does not have the church as Mother.”

The church as mother; She brings us to birth in the waters of baptism, she nurtures us with the nourishment of the Holy words of Scripture and the everlasting food and drink of the Eucharist. She teaches to grow in imitation of the saints. She shows us what is right and wrong, and disciplines us when we take the wrong path, and embraces us when we are ready to come home. She

helps us to mature into individuals without us becoming individualistic. She is there when we are ill and she is there holding our hand at the time of death.

Mother church rejoices when her children rejoice and weeps when her children weep. All those who are mothers and those who instinctively recognise the qualities of motherhood will recognise these attributes and may have a better understanding of this particular model of the church than the theologians.

Normally today would witness the gathering together of families, mothers with children in all the many ways that that can be interpreted, and mother church would normally have many of her children gathered together to give praise and thanks to God through Jesus Christ. But for the time being we are separated but only by distance, not in thoughts, prayers or spiritual communion. The care of the church for you all will not stop; it will never stop this side of heaven. In the Epistle this morning St Paul reminds us that we are children of the light, we are light to the world. WE must not lose sight of this gift and where we are able, to be light in the dark areas of fear, worry and hopelessness. The church will not or can never be dimmed, but will continue to shine for all people.

Amen.