

St Lawrence Day 2019

It was probably sometime around the year 1552 that a party of workmen came into this church one morning, carrying ladders and brushes. They walked down into the Corpus Christi chapel, climbed the ladders, got the whitewash out, and proceeded to paint over the pictures they found there. The pictures would remain hidden for almost four hundred years, only being uncovered during major work in the Church in 1933. You can see them now. One, it was pretty clear, was St. Lawrence: he is dressed as a deacon and carries a gridiron, the traditional way of showing him. The other is St. Thomas a Becket, the murdered Archbishop of Canterbury and a phenomenally popular saint across England in the medieval era. The work in the Thirties also found traces of other frescoes in the Corpus Christi Chapel: we think, from reading details of people's wills in the fifteenth century, that these might have included ones of the Blessed Virgin Mary and St Catherine of Alexandria. They're still there, somewhere, under the plaster: invisibly, silently present.

I wonder what the parishioners at the time made of their beautiful murals disappearing? We don't know how long they had been there – maybe two hundred years or so? And then one sudden morning, there was the smell of fresh paint and a blank white wall. I wonder if they began to understand or accept why it had been done? Elsewhere in the country, this is the kind of thing that led to riots and even rebellions – because it was indeed a nationwide policy, coming down from King Edward VI and Archbishop Thomas Cranmer: the paintings were to go. Cover them up. Let the walls be white. Whatever the local vicar and the local people thought – and their opinions were probably quite divided – didn't matter. This was the new, Reformed, Protestant Church of England: so farewell Thomas, Catherine, Mary, Lawrence and the rest of them. No more paintings in our churches. And really, deep down, what the Protestants wanted was no more saints.

What was their problem? Well, very simply, this. The Reformers thought that Catholic Europe had become obsessed about saints. They thought there was so much attention being paid to saints that frankly, God was in danger of being somewhat forgotten. Or, if not forgotten, then certainly misunderstood. God was seen as terribly distant, majestic, terrifying. Ordinary people like you and me couldn't be in touch with *Him*. We needed go-betweens, friends at the heavenly court, if you like: really special people who could, perhaps, bend the ear of God, have a word on our behalf. We needed *patrons*, like Lawrence, to look out for us. And as they looked out for us, we would honour them: build churches for them, name our children after them, paint their pictures on our walls, keep their feast days.

Well, enough, growled the Protestants. This is all superstition. There's not a word of this in the Bible. You don't need all these go-betweens; you don't need all this doffing and scraping. There is but one mediator between humanity and God, and that is Jesus Christ. Everyone else – even your precious Virgin Mary – is just another sinner in need of God's grace. Remove them from your walls, remove them from your hearts, and trust in Christ alone. And so out came the whitewash, and away went the saints.

Except, of course, they didn't. They were covered over – but they were still there. And the building was still *called* St. Lawrence. It might have been a close run thing whether that actually got remembered in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and indeed some local churches forgot their dedication. But the wiping of memory was never complete, and here as elsewhere, with time, it would revive, and people remembered, *St. Lawrence*. *St. Lawrence*, that's the name. Not just 'the Church of England, Abbots Langley'. *St. Lawrence*. And that insistence is really important because it is one of the ways in which the Church of England can say that despite all the changes of the Reformation, despite all the whitewash, that we are still the same Church. The same church planted here in 1154, the same church that Lawrence was part of in Rome back in the third century. The same church, one, holy, catholic, apostolic. We didn't start a new one in the sixteenth century. We reformed the old one. We have the same Bible, the same sacraments, the same creeds, the same ordained ministry: we are the same *family*. Lawrence and us belong together.

And the reason we have placed so much emphasis on that claim is this. People often think that being a Christian is a matter of what you think – do you believe the right things, and with the right level of understanding and intensity? Or more often, perhaps, they think it's a matter of what you do – are you a good person? Do you visit the sick, feed the hungry, clothe the naked etc? Well, the Bible is indeed very keen that we should both believe and do the right things. However, what it is also keen on, really keen on, is this: are you part of God's people? Are you part of the family? In both Old and New Testament, the emphasis is not just about what you think or what you do, it's not even primarily about those. It's on *membership*. Do you belong?

And in the New Testament at any rate, the reason that is the key question is because the Church is not just a group of people, not even an immensely large group of people. No, says the Bible, the Church is something much more mysterious than that. The Church is not so much a group as it is, says Paul famously, a Body. An organism, through which one life flows, the life of Jesus Christ who is that Body's head, its heart, its very deepest reality. The Church is the way the risen Jesus chooses to send his life flowing out into the world: He doesn't sit up in Heaven alone, it's as if – Pentecost says never mind *as if*, it really *is* – that He breathes himself into the community that follows Him. His breath, his energy, becomes their deepest reality. His life spreads itself in them, through them. Through - that is - us. That's what Communion is all about: that through sharing the bread and wine, His life runs into our lives: we're joined with Him, and we're joined to each other. Believing and doing follow, but sharing comes first. Are you part of the Body, that's the key thing. Are you truly *joined*, grafted in? Because only when you are, can Jesus' life flow in you and through you out into the world.

And if all that sounds a little too mysterious, here's the practical version. Here's what it actually *means* to be part of the Body, to have the life of Jesus rising within and flowing from you. Philippians Chapter Two: Let the life of Jesus work itself out in you, that life which looks like a Cross, which constantly empties itself out so that others might live. Let Jesus be generous, radically, wildly generous in everything you do: in how you give your love, your time, your money. Let Jesus be humble in you when you are people without egos: who don't take offence, who don't hold grudges, who are not up themselves. Micah Chapter 6. What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly with your God? That's the divine law: let Jesus keep it in you. Matthew Chapter 5: Blessed are the pure in heart, blessed are the peacemakers, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Let Jesus make you the blessed. That's what waits for us in that bread and wine, what waits to run into us and through us, what we share with Alban, and Thomas, and Lawrence and Mary and each other and all the company of heaven. That's why it is wonderful to be part of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church, and why we give thanks to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.