

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



Passion Sunday

26 March 2023

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Sermon by Br Charlie Annis, Community of the Resurrection

Unbind him and let him go

In the name of the Father...

I have spent most of Lent with an interesting man. His name is Ephrem and he is a poet from a small town right on the border between Turkey and Syria. He is also a Doctor of the Catholic Church who died about 1600 years before I was born. So it has been a bit of one-way relationship. There are many reasons why someone might choose to spend some time with the man more commonly known as Saint Ephrem the Syrian. Not least among them, is that so beautiful were the hymns he wrote in his native Syriac in praise of the mystery of salvation, that he was known by his contemporaries simply as “the Harp of the [Holy] Spirit”.

But another, equally good, reason to be acquainted with St Ephrem is that he is the foremost representative of a Christianity which, despite its great antiquity, is almost completely foreign to us: Syriac Christianity. To put this very briefly in context, from its earliest days the Christian religion has represented a rather audacious attempt to hold together two quite different traditions of thought and culture, the Greek and the Semitic. And, of all the many branches of the Christian Church that emerged from this uneasy marriage of traditions, Syriac Christianity was probably the most thoroughly Semitic of them all. And so although it was Greek language and culture that eventually came to dominate Christian theology both East and West, it was not until much later that Syriac Christianity began to show signs of Greek influence, which was only after St Ephrem was writing. In other words, what we have in St Ephrem the Syrian is the voice of an authentically Semitic, non-European Christianity that is every bit as ancient as anything in Greek or Latin. So what does this authentically Semitic Christian voice have to say to us here at the beginning of Passiontide, and what does it have to do with being made in the image of God?

Well, of all the many remarkable things St Ephrem has to say for himself, perhaps the most striking to our ears is the way he talks about the Incarnation. Because when St Ephrem talks about the Word becoming flesh, he talks about it in terms of clothing. He says that when the Son of God became man he “stripped off” his glory and “put on” a body. Now this idea of the Incarnation as clothing is novel enough to us on its own. But it’s not only the Incarnation that St Ephrem sees in terms of clothing, but the whole mystery of salvation. According to St Ephrem the reason Christ strips off his glory and puts on a body is in order to re-clothe humanity in the glory we stripped off when we fell from grace in the Garden of Eden. According to St Ephrem, Adam and Eve were not naked in their state of innocence but clothed in what he calls the “robe of glory”. Their fall from grace consisted in the loss of this robe, making it necessary for them to cover their nakedness with one inferior garment after another, first the fig leaves, then the “garments of skin”, right up to the clothing of today. Or rather, until the coming of Christ. Because, according to St Ephrem, when Christ descends

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into the waters of the Jordan at his baptism he leaves there for us that very same robe of glory that was lost by our ancestors, so that by stripping off the garments of sin and descending into the waters of baptism we might once more be clothed in the glory for which we were created.

Now this might all be sounding rather strange to you, which it is, to our ears at least. And yet, it may not be quite as unfamiliar as it first appears, because, on closer inspection, St Ephrem's account of the mystery of salvation is essentially a version of *The Prince and the Pauper*. Remember that in that tale by Mark Twain, the Prince of Wales, the future King Edward VI, meets Tom Canty, a pauper from the poorest and most squalid part of London. And when they discover they look exactly alike the two temporarily switch clothes, and from that point onwards Tom Canty the Pauper is taken for the Prince of Wales and is pampered and trumpeted wherever he goes, while the real Prince is taken for a insignificant pauper and is scorned and mistreated and only very narrowly avoids being killed. Now this, in nutshell, is how St Ephrem understands the saving work of Christ in the Incarnation. Christ the Prince strips off his glory, puts on the garment of our human flesh and submits to being scorned and rejected and eventually crucified, in order that the pauper, humanity, clothed in the glory of Christ through baptism, might receive the inheritance of a son and heir.

It's a charming story, but is actually what we find in the gospels? Well, in one sense, when we turn our attention to the gospels, what we find is that they bear out this version of events very nicely. We see Christ scorned and rejected by the Pharisees and scribes, we see him taking the place of a servant and washing his disciples's feet and of course eventually we see him betrayed and crucified. In other words, we have no trouble locating in the gospels the ordeal of the Prince. What we see only in glimpses, however, is the other side of the story, the exaltation of the Pauper, humanity. And we don't see it for the very good reason that the Pauper doesn't know it is happening. Like poor Tom Canty bustled about from room to room by trains of liveried servants, the disciples spend most of the gospels with only the faintest idea what is going on. It is only after Christ has been raised from the dead that they begin to grasp what he has done for them. Only after the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost are they able to articulate it and to call all nations to "repent and be baptised", and only later still that St Paul can speak of "put[ting] on the Lord Jesus Christ", and of the baptised as those who have "clothed themselves" with Christ. Because, unlike in Twain's original tale when the exchange of clothing happens simultaneously, in this version of the story, it is only when the Prince's ordeal is over, only once he has passed through through the very depths of poverty and alienation and death for our sake, that the Pauper can be clothed in the splendour of the Prince in the waters of baptism.

And that is what makes today's gospel something rather special. Because what we see in the household at Bethany, in Mary, Martha and above all in the dead man Lazarus, is not merely the plight of fallen humanity cast out of the Garden and stripped of the robe of glory, but a foreshadowing of that same fallen humanity's exaltation in the waters of baptism. The stripping off of Lazarus's garments

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of death when he is called out of the tomb into the light, is not merely an anticipation of Christ's resurrection and the linen wrappings of the empty tomb, but a foreshadowing of the garments of sin we strip off when we descend into waters of baptism, there to be clothed in the glory of Christ.

But what, you may be wondering, does all of this have to do with being made in the image of God? Well, actually, rather a lot. Remember that in the story, the only reason the ruse comes off in the first place is that the Prince and Tom Canty look so very much alike. Well, the very same thing is true of the mystery of our salvation. The only reason we can, through baptism, come to stand before the Father in the place of the Son and share in his glory, is that from the beginning we were made in his image, to resemble him in every respect. And here the mystery of salvation is audacious enough to depart from the script laid down by Mark Twain, because it is no happy coincidence that we are dead ringers for the Son of God. It was the plan from the moment we were created. We were made in the image of Christ in order that we might come to share in the eternal joy of his loving relationship with the Father.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.