

Sermon 2nd Sunday before Lent 2021 – February 7th

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‘Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold’.

The immediate years that followed both the First and Second World Wars were full of hope. Though people were still

living with rationing and economic hardship there was a larger cultural synthesis about the nature of reality, a dream of a world that was deeply centred. We only need to recall the images and slogans that were repeatedly heard in the middle of the last century: “racial integration,” “the family of man,” “global village,” “spaceship earth.”

It was a time when the world gave birth to the United Nations, NATO and the European Union, The Christian Church gave birth to the World Council of Churches, the Vatican Council, Ecumenism and the National Conference of Christians and Jews. In this country it gave birth to the NHS and the culmination of the Welfare State, with its promise to provide for the people of the United Kingdom ‘from the cradle to the grave’. There was hope found in the possibility of a centripetal world – a world that was deeply centred.

It was a time when philosophers talked about the unification of all reality. The French philosopher-theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin asserted that “everything that rises must converge,” and used words like “hominization” and “planetisation.” The urbanologist Lewis Mumford claimed that “civilization is the never-ending process of creating one world and one humanity.” The sociologist Pitrim Sorokin believed that human civilization was moving from independent and isolated groups to “a state of one unified, universal, interdependent whole.” The historian Arnold Toynbee dreamed about a “synthesis” of world religions. The philosopher Karl Jaspers proclaimed “the world is closed. The unity of the earth has arrived.” The dream was of a dramatic shift towards the centre, toward the convergent, toward the universal. People dreamed about a more profound centring that would unify the diversity of human experience and reality.

But something began to happen in the late sixties. It maybe was my fault as I was born in June 1969. Whatever the cause, a revolution occurred. The centre began to give way, and then, probably from the 1980s onwards, the centre collapsed. We moved from dreaming of a centripetal world and instead moved towards a centrifugal world, a world that had no centre. We have now reached a tipping point where the dominant forces today have completely moved away from any kind of centre into uncentred and chaotic diversity.

The Church has also struggled with how to define, even to talk about, a centre for the Christian faith, for the church, for their institutions. As a result the Church has felt divided and lost, mirroring our societal divisions.

Whereas my parents grew up within the hope of a centripetal world, we now find ourselves inhabiting a centrifugal world. William Butler Yeats prophetically stated at the end of World War I: "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold."

People live in fear and uncertainty because "things fall apart; the centre cannot hold." This deep anxiety drives people in search of a centre that will offer some sense of security and, unable to find such a centre, they turn in on themselves. We are seeing this all too clearly in our present age with the rise of Nationalism and Populism. We are seeing it in the unedifying arguments around vaccine nationalism, the dominance of individual freedom over collegiality, we are seeing it in the binary nature of our present social, religious and political discourse.

Does the Christian Faith have anything to say to such a world? Can we find any centre that will help us navigate in such a context?

You will not be surprised to hear me confidently say 'Yes'. Yes, because this morning I can commend to you the words of Paul in today's first reading, "in Christ all things hold together". Christ is the centre. Nothing and no one is excluded. This line is part of a hymn or confession that makes up the whole of our first reading.

This Colossian hymn was addressed to a group of Christians who, like us, had experienced a disintegration of the centre. Life felt out of control. These Colossian Christians were so anxious about life without a centre that they were being tempted towards unhealthy teachings and practices in the quest for hope and security. They wanted assurance that God was able to protect them from the powers that seemed to overwhelm them. Paul's response was this Colossian hymn that is as pertinent for us today as it was for the Colossians in their time.

Paul begins by emphatically stating that Jesus is Lord of the universe. We have just heard the great opening of St John's Gospel. 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...and the Word became flesh and lived among us...' Jesus is Lord of the universe.

This lordship of Jesus means that Jesus is the image of the invisible God, that Jesus reveals the true nature of God in the world and that Jesus reveals the character of God in relationship.

The lordship of Jesus also means that Jesus is the firstborn of creation. This phrase, 'the image of God', therefore defines Jesus' relation to God. Whereas the phrase, 'the firstborn of creation,' defines Jesus' relation to creation. This "Firstborn" language defines priority of rank and sovereignty, here in relation to all the created order. But Paul does not stop there. Paul then explains what this sovereignty means in two further phrases, "All things were created in him" and "in Christ all things hold together".

Therefore for Paul, and so gloriously affirmed in the opening of John's Gospel, God's creation takes place in Christ and is dependent on Christ. All created reality, even the cosmic principalities and powers, are created in, through and for Christ. Therefore, all created reality also is subject to Christ, with Christ as the sustainer of the universe. Christ is the unifying force of creation. It is Christ who holds all things together.

We don't believe in a God of the gaps but a God who is in all and for all. There is nowhere where God is absent. There is nowhere where God is not sovereign. It is astonishing liberating theology that Paul is offering us.

Paul's then moves on to state that Jesus is also the head of the Body, the church.

This "headship of Jesus" is also defined by two phrases. Jesus is "the beginning," a term which again denotes primacy and Jesus is "the firstborn of the dead." He is the firstborn of a new creation of resurrected people. To say that Jesus is the head of the body as the 'beginning' and the 'firstborn of the dead' is to say that he is the founder of the church. The church is Jesus' new people in the world through which he expresses his lordship.

This extraordinary creedal hymn, that we have heard today in Paul's letter to the Colossians, offers us therefore the two critical benchmarks for centring in our centrifugal world: the revelation of Christ as Lord of all and the potential of a people in community. Both are the critical pegs on which to anchor our faith and our world in turbulent times.

Our central task as disciples in a such a world is to point people to the very centre of the Christian faith, Christ and the people of Christ; the centre of a new centripetal world – a centre where all are known, made in the image and likeness of God.

Where all are valued because each one of us is fearfully and wonderfully made, each made in the image and likeness of God. Where all are loved because each one of us is loved beyond all measure by God. The Church becomes the centre when we gather to be sent out to love and serve the world.

So it is in Christ where we will find our shared identity, one that is rooted in loving dynamic community. Christ is the very centre that the world has lost and the world has not been able to find anything else that will bind us together.

"Things fall apart; the centre does not hold."

'In Christ all things hold together'. The Good News is that Jesus is Lord and is the centre of all. May we, Christ's body on earth, Christ's church of which he is the head, be the loving, welcoming, healing, restoring and reconciling centre that the world so desperately needs and clearly yearns for.

Amen