**Easter V, 2025**

Is the Church important? I don’t mean these four walls and roof: they are only a ‘church’ by a kind of shorthand. I mean *The* Church, the faithful company of believers, the congregation of Christians, the mystical Body of Christ, the “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church,” that one. Is it important?

Paul and Barnabas seem to think so. Here they are, wandering around the ancient near-east, preaching the good news, but look at what they do in each place: in Lystra and Iconium and Antioch they “strengthen the disciples.” In “every church” they appoint “elders” or priests, and they commend those congregations to the Lord. When they arrive at Antioch, immediately, “they gathered the Church together” around them.

It’s not an optional extra, this gathering together with other believers: it’s crucial. We aren’t saved by God in splendid isolation, but in community with our brothers and sisters in Christ. We are saved *by* Christ, *in* and *through* the Church, because the Church tells us the Good News about Jesus, brings us to Jesus, makes us one with Jesus, *by Whom* we are saved.

Perhaps that spiritual reality can be hard to imagine, if we are too often thinking of the Church as a building, or of ‘church’ as an hour on Sunday which we may or may not relish but are dimly aware is a solemn duty. I suspect it’s even harder to remember at times when the politics, or the scandals of the Church are too much in the forefront of our minds. We forget to see the wood for all these trees crowding our vision.

Thank God, them for the vision of S. John, “the holy city, New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.” What is he seeing? The Church. The Church, not as she is seen with the eyes of the flesh, made up of saints and sinners (those aren’t mutually-exclusive terms, by the way). The Church rather as she will be seen with the eyes of faith at the End of Days, when she will be solemnly presented to our Lord, her spouse, her husband, her Beloved.

It's a vision of the Church in the future. The Church wholly Triumphant over sin and death, no part of her still struggling in the flesh, the Church Militant here on earth; nor undergoing purification for sin, the Church Expectant in Purgatory. But Holy Church as she is now, the saints in heaven, the holy souls in purgatory, and us waging the spiritual war here on earth, is growing into that Bride, that holy city, as she *will be*, when all things are made new.

A bridegroom, on seeing his bride coming down the aisle, might well exclaim ‘glorious!’ So too with Jesus: He looks on the Church, His Bride, even now as she is in her earthly pilgrimage, and sees that she is glorious, because she is part of His glory. Along with the glory of the Cross, and His obedience to the Father; along with the glory of the Resurrection, the glory of defeated death and vanquished grave; along with the glory He will have at the Judgment, when all things will be put under His feet, He has too the glory of the Church, the glory of being known and loved by His creatures. You and I are part of the glory of God. Isn’t that astonishing?

So astonishing, in fact, that it’s tempting to disbelieve it. I’m not sure, for myself, that I find it terribly easy to believe that I in any sense at all contribute to God’s glory. What lustre could I, could any of us, frail children of dust, possibly add to the divine light?

The answer is in the Commandment Jesus gives His disciples, new not because it had not been given before – it’s in Leviticus – but because it has now a new effect: “love one another.” Love is the lustre of God’s glory, the brightness of His radiance. When we love, we take part in God, Who *is* love. The greater our love, the closer that union, until the day when, like a bride inseparably joined to her husband, we will be united to Him in the glory of love forever.

“Love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.” Those are the conditions; those are our marching orders. How did Christ love us? Here’s three ways, which I’ve gratuitously stolen from S. Thomas:

Christ loves us gratuitously, effectively, and rightly. Gratuitously, freely, because He loved us first, without any reason to, without any deserving on our part, without our love to return. Effectively, because for love He died for us: “Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.” Rightly, because He loved us in order to draw us to God, loving in us what was truly lovable.

Let us do likewise: let us love our brothers and sisters first, without waiting for them to make the first move, or to earn our love, or to be particularly loveable; in fact, let’s go out of our way to cultivate love for those we have least reason to love. Next, “let us love not in word or in speech but in deed and in truth,” as S. John says. Love is known only by its effects, and love which has no effect and bears no fruit is false. And last, let us love rightly, loving people not for the pleasure they give us, or for what we get out of it, but for the sake of their good, their salvation, for the glory which accrues to God in them.

Doing that, strengthened, encouraged, and committed to God in and through the Church, Christ’s Body and Bride, let us build up God’s kingdom of love, God’s Holy Church, to the glory of His Holy Name. Amen.