

Sunday 11th July 2021 - 6th Sunday after Trinity

St Mary's Barnes, 8am, Bishop Richard Harries

Who do we think we are?

What is the essence of being a human being? What distinguishes us from the rest of the animal creation? I suppose most of us would quickly reply: our capacity to reason and make moral choices. That is the answer I would have given for most of my life. But I now think that I, along with the whole of our society, need a radical re-think. For though our capacity to choose and think are features of our life, they do not get to the heart of the matter.

In the first book of the Bible, we read 'Then God said "let us make human beings in our image, after our likeness"' but in the light of the coming of Christ this needs to be qualified. As Paul put it Christ himself 'is the image of the invisible God'. (2 Cor. 4.15) He is the *eikon*, the true representation. In this he reveals not just the heart of God but what it is to be a human being. We see what this is in the earthly life and ministry of Jesus. He lived his life in perfect response to the one he called 'Abba, Father'. Everything he was and did, as he made clear, he received from the father and in return he gave to the father a full and unbroken response. 'Abba, Father, not my will but thine be done.'

This picture of Divine self-giving and human response is a slice in time and history of what is eternally present within the Godhead. God is infinite loving creativity. He pours himself out in a perfect representation and reflection of himself in the Word, and this word in response offers a full and unqualified love. There is also the Spirit which fills the word, and which goes forth in endless creativity. But leaving that aside for the moment we see that the Icon, the Divine/human image, is not something that is static. It is a receiving and responding; a receiving all that is as sheer gift with a corresponding total trust and obedience.

How we are to think of the relationship between the true image of God in Christ and ourselves made after that image might be seen in this way. Phidias is generally regarded as the father of Greek Sculpture. He carved the original Athena on the Parthenon for example. But none of his works survive. We know them only through Roman copies. So, we have the source in the imagined, invisible Athena, the original image now lost and the copies. Like all analogies it fails. First the true image, Christ, is not lost. He is the true and perfect image of the divine source made visible in human term and we are

made to reflect that. That example is also misleading in another respect, in thinking of something static or statuesque. What we have is a pattern and a movement of giving and response, of divine out pouring and self-communication with a corresponding self-giving. We do not just reflect the divine image like a statue, we participate in it. When we receive our being as sheer gift and respond in filial response as Christ did to the Father, we actually share, through the Holy Spirit, in the divine life- and we are not just made in that image but called to grow more and more into its likeness, in the process called *theosis* or divinisation.

There is another vital implication of this. The person you are, the real you are not identical with the you at any particular period of your life. Which is the real you? When you were young or now? Where is the element of continuity? The short answer is that it is not anything fixed or final. We are all works in progress, and the element of continuity in our life is not provided by our memories or by digging about in the brain looking for an invisible self, but by the steadfast, undeviating good purpose of God towards us. This purpose which is for our continuous growth into the divine life and likeness. As John put, what we shall be is not yet disclosed but we know that we shall be like him.

A final very crucial practical implication of this. Our self is not a centre we have to defend, or which is in competition with others. As our self is the being and life, we receive moment by moment and to which we are called to respond. So that infinite loving creativity is the source and ground of all life, seeking to draw all human life into itself and filling all life. This means the people whom we meet day by day are part of that same pattern of gift and invitation to respond to see our life in this way is also to see others differently, not as bounded selves as a threat to us, but as recipients of the grace in which and by which we live.

This involves I believe a radical re-think of the usual assumptions of our culture. Our self is in the process of being formed as we receive the divine gift and divine invitation with its steady good will towards us. As we respond we come to see others in the same light, as part of that same gift.