

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 15/Trinity VII Year B 2024

This past Thursday - 11th July - the church observed the feast of St Benedict of Nursia, the great 6th-century founder of Western monasticism. In the smoldering ruins of the Roman empire, St Benedict through his Rule and through the communities that lived by it, a spark was lit that kept the flame of Western civilization ablaze for a thousand years. The Rule of Benedict contains much humane and profound wisdom, hence its enduring legacy. In chapter three of the Rule – titled ‘Summoning the Brothers for Counsel’ - St Benedict argued that when decisions need to be made in the community, everyone should be listened to. He says, ‘The reason why we have said all should be called for counsel is that the Lord often reveals what is better to the younger.’

I was reminded of this insight also this past week when one of our younger adults pointed out to me that today – July 14th – is the anniversary of John Keble preaching the Assize sermon in 1833, and so launching what became known as the Oxford Movement. Indeed, it is the fervour and interest of the young - at least in this matter - we would do well to heed. Some today may be celebrating Bastille Day and the bloody launch of the French Revolution. It is meet and right that today we instead recall the movement to which we are so indebted. Benedict may have lit a spark with his Rule and with his monastic communities. But so did John Keble, a young, humble and holy priest in the Church of England through what he preached at St Mary’s University Church this day in Oxford 191 years ago.

As with so many movements in human history, it began innocuously enough. Keble and his colleagues, most notably Edward Pusey and John Henry Newman, became convinced that the Church of England had abandoned its heritage as a catholic and apostolic church. The presenting issue Keble addressed in his sermon was the interference of parliament in the church’s life in Ireland. An issue so serious Keble identified it as a *betrayal* of the true church, an apostasy. And so the title of his sermon, ‘National Apostasy.’ Keble used the opportunity to argue that the true source of the Church’s authority was apostolic succession. The line of bishops, consecrated by prayer and the laying on of hands, could be traced back to Christ himself. The Church of England, he argued, was the representative in England of Christ’s universal and eternal church. And as such, part of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. The key point for Keble and his confreres is that the Church of England needed to affirm that its authority *did not come* from the state, but from God.

Now, this is an issue we might not fully appreciate in a largely secular 21st-century Australia. But the Church of England was (and remains) an established church, sometimes described as an ‘official state religion.’ In such a system church and state are closely entwined. But Keble recognized that this entwining gets a bit sticky when non-churchmen - those who are not committed to the faith and practice of the church - have a say in the life and governance of the church! In Keble’s context, the question was why on earth was parliament in London seeing fit to abolish dioceses in Ireland? Now, we might have an idealized and romantic view of the relationship between king and country. But that relationship is compromised – put under severe pressure - when those who do not share the faith presume to rule on the faith.

What Keble, Newman, Pusey, and the rest fought for was a restoration – a revival – in understanding the church not as an arm of the state but as a *divine society*. They recognised that the church is impoverished, indeed betrayed, if the reference point for the church’s life is the state. The church’s reference point is Christ! And so the church’s society is a *distinct society*, a distinction most clearly expressed in the church’s sacramental life. And so, the Oxford Fathers saw it was right and just to restore the worship, faith, and devotion of the ancient and undivided church. And it meant that the Eucharist could be restored as the central act of Christian worship, as it had since the time of the apostles.

Keble lit a spark through this sermon, and in time what became known as The Oxford Movement became a major force in the Church of England, and around the world. Between 1833 and 1841 a series of pamphlets – little tracts – arguing for their cause gave the other name to the Movement: the Tractarians. But it really is better described as the Catholic Revival. We ought remember how turgid and dull 18th and early 19th - Century religion was in England. After the turmoil and bloodshed a couple of centuries previous, this was seen by many as a happy price to pay. But turgid and dull it was! The Oxford Movement is rightly understood as a *revival*, not simply because it restored things lost, but because it *revived* the church. It breathed fresh life into it.

Proposing the church as truly being part of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church also meant pushing against an understanding of the Church of England as having simply emerged at the time of the 16th-century Protestant Reformation. The Oxford Fathers reminded that the central pillars of the Church of England had not been constructed at the time of the Reformation, but received from the ancient church.

The primacy of scripture, the historical creeds, assent to the ecumenical councils, and the historic episcopate show that the Church of England possessed a truly catholic faith. This recovery had further radical implications. Yes, it led to a renewed appreciation for the church's catholic heritage and tradition, and in particular the importance of the apostolic ministry and the sacraments. But it led also to a recovery of *the beauty* of the church's worship in its ceremonies, vestments, and music. It led too to a recovery of Anglican spiritual life, the revival of monastic life within Anglicanism, and appreciation for the ancient doctrines, discipline, and devotional practices of the church. In short, almost all that we surround ourselves with here (and probably take for granted!), in 1832 would have been unthinkable!

Here at All Saints, we are proud inheritors of this movement. Fr Gregory who built this church between 1858 and 1892, was one the earliest (and perhaps most enthusiastic) exponents of the revival in this country, and certainly the boldest in Melbourne. What he instigated here in the latter decades of the 19th Century was controversial, but also attractive to many. Before the end of the 19th Century, the parish had a library that housed Tractarian volumes, and there was a men's discussion group that explored in detail the catholic faith. Now, after Fr Gregory departed, the hierarchy in Melbourne sought to rein in what was perceived as the catholic 'excesses' of this place. And for 70 years or so All Saints was pretty non-descript and 'middle of the road'. In the last few decades, however, there has been a steady attempt to restore the catholic origins of this place and indeed to reassert the principles of the Catholic Revival. And as we continue to do so, we seek to claim this church as a legitimate and authentic expression of the faith catholic.

Now, for those unfamiliar with the history it might all sound terribly obtuse and abstract, and maybe even irrelevant. It may be enough to say that what Keble preached at Oxford on this day in 1833 initiated a revival of which we are the beneficiaries. But today's anniversary should remind us of two key issues Keble addressed as relevant today as then. Firstly, Keble reminds us that we must guard against the encroachment of the state upon the church. It remains a heated issue. In the state of Victoria (mirroring what is now in place in many jurisdictions) it is now forbidden – by law – to pray for, or to have a conversation with, someone experiencing gender confusion that might suggest to them something other than complete affirmation. Clergy and even parents can only affirm this confusion at the risk of either fines or imprisonment.

Throughout this country, some loud agitators seek to remove the protection churches and church organisations have to hire and fire according to faith-based principles. There are many other examples. Enough to say, *legitimate expressions of faith and practice* can be compromised through the interference of the state, against which we must guard.

And secondly, this anniversary reminds us of that key insight of the catholic revival: that *the church is a divine society*. It has a distinct character. And this divine, and distinct character is *best reflected* in the church's worship and sacramental life. Not in social causes. Not in echoing the morality of the world around us back to itself. Not in cozying up to the civic authorities. The divine and distinct character of the church is best reflected in the church's worship and sacramental life. We know that there is a constant strand in the church - including the Anglican church – that seeks to keep on chipping away at this understanding. But on catholic principles, against this we must resist and stand firm! The vesture, ceremonies, music, architecture, all the externals of catholic worship and identity only go to *reinforce and support this belief*: that the church is set apart, that it has its own distinct culture, that we are a society that looks to Christ as its reference and not the world. And it is the Eucharist celebrated reverently and beautifully that secures and guarantees this.

We may be tempted to think of the externals of the catholic faith as merely a matter of aesthetics or of taste, or of psychological disposition: some prefer the artistic and visual, others prefer the cerebral and intellectual, some formality and others informality. This *was not* what the Oxford Fathers argued for, and indeed what a later generation of Tractarians were persecuted and imprisoned for. The Catholic Revival – which we maintain and celebrate here – does not depend on taste or aesthetics. At its heart is the quest for truth, the fullness of truth. A truth that rests by keeping Christ at the centre. Amen.