



# *Christ Church Cathedral*

## OXFORD

**30 August 2020: Matins Sermon**

**The Twelfth Sunday after Trinity**

**Psalm 37:30–41, Jonah 3:1–9, Revelation 3:14–end**

**The Revd Canon Dr Robin Gibbons (Melkite), Ecumenical Canon**

I am surprised at the attack on some Christian images of Christ and Mary as Caucasian, European and colonial. Anybody with a moderate understanding of Christianity and the living tradition of its art, particularly that connected to liturgy and spirituality, will understand that there is no 'life' image of Christ, there never has been! In fact, the Christ has been portrayed in as many varieties of race and skin colours as exist in the human family. We came from a tradition that forbade images of the Divine One and as it adapted and changed particularly in its early art portraying religious images, Christianity borrowed from the Greco Roman world where gods were portrayed in human form, so in the catacombs you will find Christ in the guise of a shepherd God or Orpheus in his chariot., artists through the ages have made him their own, so wherever the followers of Jesus are, and art is used, he appears as somebody linked to the people of that place and time, what, one might say, that makes Jesus familiar and at home with us. You are well able to see how that links with the theological understanding of the several presences of Christ we encounter in our lives, in each other as gathered community, in the Word preached, spoken, listened to, in the neglected, poor, the outcast, in sacramental symbols, such as baptism and forgiveness and of course in that raw way of eating and consuming those gifts of his spiritual self in the form of bread and wine.

But there is also the personal Christ each one of us has to encounter, that Christ of our heart, the one who will ask of us not only; 'who do you say I am?' (Mt 13:16) But at the last speak to us in this manner: "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'" (Mt 25: 40)

In this sense of encounter and presence with a Christ who both wants to encounter and visit with us, but also prepare us to receive him, there is one phrase that leaps up at us from this reading from the last of the letters to the seven churches in Revelation, and it is true that Laodicea is not a fruitful city, not a good place for the words of the Amen to be heard by the

messenger. The first section of our passage is harsh, hard, scathing even, these people are apathetic, beyond caring about Christ. Perhaps they have that deadly disease of the monastic life, acedia, deep laziness, indifference or apathy about the things of God, a dark boredom, gloom or even hate that cannot easily be removed. In a book on this vice of the spiritual life, *The Noonday Devil: Acedia, The Unnamed Evil of Our Times*, by a Benedictine monk, Jean-Charles Nault, O.S.B. the Canadian Cardinal Marc Ouellet wrote this in the foreword:

Very early on, the monastic tradition became interested in a strange and complex phenomenon: acedia. Spiritual sloth, sadness, and a disgust with the things of God, a loss of the meaning of life, despair of attaining salvation: acedia drives the monk to leave his cell and to flee intimacy with God, so as to seek here and there some compensation for the austere way of life to which he felt called by God.

But this warning is not only for monks, it is for all of us. Ouellet calls acedia the 'sin of our times', it is a complex and insidious sin, for it pervades everything like a heavy smog of depression, but unlike depression which weighs us down, acedia is a war between desires and thoughts, and to my mind it seems to have been the sin of Laodicea and yes, I can see it as a sin of our times, I can feel touched by it. Bernard of Clairvaux said it was an incurable spiritual disease, but I don't believe that. All things can be healed in Christ, so how?

All is not lost, I pick up from our reading a phrase, which is an antidote, one profound and far reaching. In this phrase I can discern the remedy, a remedy suitable for us today, for in it we find the voice of salvation: "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me". (Rev 3: 30)

I imagine many of you will know the famous picture 'The Light of the World', painted by Holman Hunt, and described as the great Protestant icon of Christ, by Neil MacGregor, when he was Director of the National Gallery, in his brilliant series 'Seeing Salvation', produced in 2000 by the BBC in conjunction with the Exhibition in the National Gallery. If you don't know what the painting is like we have the first painting of three, here in Oxford, inside Keble College Chapel. Begun in 1849 it was completed in 1853 and after being exhibited in the Royal Academy was donated to Keble College. Of this painting Holman Hunt said it brought him to Christ. A second smaller painting hangs in Manchester City Art Gallery and a third larger one, painted at the end of Hunt's life and completed by a friend is in St Paul's cathedral, this was the image that toured the world drawing enormous crowds to see it. This popularity and religious fervour is the reason why MacGregor called it the Protestant icon.

What of it? Today it is considered very much a Victorian pre-Raphaelite image of Christ, one perhaps not so popular, but it is worth spending time with it, because those words, “Here I am, I stand at the door and knock”, are the meaning of the painting, but the painting itself is the answer. In its own way it gives us clues, hints, helps to deal with our own quest for the Christ of our hearts.

Let me describe it very simply: it's set at night, a rather Victorian looking Christ, white with long blonde hair, is holding a lantern in his left hand and faces us, his halo is a full moon, making the darkness more evocative. On his head a crown around which are entwined thorns. His right hand is knocking on a closed door, a door with no handle, so it can only be opened from inside. He wears a long cloak over a white robe, and the cloak has a decorated clasp resembling the breastplate worn by the High priest in the Temple on the feast of the Atonement.

These symbolic layers of meaning are worth a sermon in themselves, but for my purpose there are three things to note: the surroundings, a dark wood aptly symbolising danger, discord, darkness, very much as we often find our world. Then there is the door, our door, that door to ourselves, our hearts our desires and life. It is shut against the Christ and surrounded with weeds and discarded rotting fruit. It hasn't been opened for a long time! This is truly a place of acedia, lostness.

But all is not lost, that answer to the problems of our faith journey is answered in that third image of the face of the Christ figure. His look is not one of anger, nor laughter, but a penetrating gaze inviting us to look into his face and stay in that look, for anywhere we turn those eyes follow us in patient love, inviting us to make the connection, become his friend, open that door. Has Christ been there long? Hunt's painting hints he has and has an immense patience, born out of the perseverance of loving mercy, that deep abiding compassion of God.

A small note, his feet are turned sideways suggesting that he wants to move on, but cannot, all his power is poised in that perseverance, the knock, waiting for us to open up the door of the heart, from our side to let him in. There is another twist, for this Christ the Light of the World, this Christ holds a lantern with symbols from Judaism and Islam, a great hint that there is no barrier between that knock of Christ and any who seek his truth!

So I end by suggesting that we listen deeply to those words of the book of Revelation, 'Here I am, I stand at the door and knock, take them to our heart and check if we have kept the door of our hearts closed. We too like Christ have to learn the values of perseverance, hanging on, going the

extra mile and making an extra effort to let him in, for that is the true response. We will then meet in him, and eat with him and be together with him. And do not be afraid of the power of tears, that is a gift of God. For our tears of repentance wash away many things. I suspect when we fully open that door to Christ, we shall cry with tears of sorrow that will turn into tears of mercy and finally tears of joy.

My good friend Canon Angela Tilby is a scholar of Evagrius Pontus a 4th c theologian and it is her influence that led me to discover he wrote on acedia and its remedy. I leave the last comment to him, "Make use of tears to obtain the fulfilment of your every request, for the Lord rejoices greatly over you when he receives prayer accompanied by tears." Amen, Amen. That, my friends, is what we have to learn: true perseverance in our faith, it is the antidote to acedia! We must prise open the door of our hearts, let him in. With him we persevere in knocking on the door of other people's hearts and help them to let Christ in. Amen.