

St Luke's in the City

Celebrating at the Crossroads **25th Sunday after Pentecost, 18 November 2007**

Dear Friends,

TWENTY five Sundays ago we celebrated the Feast of Pentecost. Throughout the twenty five weeks of 'green time' since then I have been meditating on our baptismal life as the community of faith. I come now to the last of these reflections on 'liturgy, theology, church and mission'. We believe, so we affirm in the 'Apostles' Creed', in "the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting". Christian doctrines are expressions of ultimate truths, but in the hands of a rationalistic, individualistic or puritanical mindset so readily become dead things, prisons for the soul. Throughout this series I have endeavoured to peel back some of the many layers of religion in the head, religion for solo individuals, and religion as security device. In this final reflection attention turns to 'life everlasting'.

In a tragic perversion of the gospel life everlasting is subject to two distortions - the portrayal of a reward in some future time and place for the labours, sufferings and of a generally-distorted moral restraint in this 'fallen world'; and as the reward for gloriously-isolated super-righteous individuals. Curiously, both of these distortions are routinely paraded at funerals, by both card-carrying Christians and so-called non-believers alike. The first requires the radical separation of heaven and earth, the divine and the human, the flesh and the spirit. This is actually the un-doing, the reversal of Incarnation, 'God with us'. The second distortion makes of salvation an individualistic possession - "Blessed assurance", as the 19th century hymn asserts (as do so many others) is "mine" - "I and my Saviour happy and blest". 'Heaven' is so easily a product, ironically peddled by those who want to sell us ice creams, cars, dream holidays and religious products alike. The New Testament, by contrast, speaks of life everlasting in thoroughly holistic and communal terms - the completion or fulfilment which is the promise for the whole created order, the cosmos, the one-ness of all things in God. "The whole creation waits in eager longing..." "so that God may be all in all..." "in him all things hold together..." "so that they may be one as we are one... that all may be one." There is no place in this cosmic vision for private heaven, nor can heaven be another time and place - "the Kingdom of Heaven is upon!"

The unitive vision of Christian faith does not, however, annihilate individual identity. "We who are many are one body in Christ..." we say when the Bread is broken. The mystery of our faith is that we matter as the many, who are simultaneously being drawn into the One. Everlasting life is the fulfilment of each of us as unique individuals who are learning to live, in the way of Jesus, by pouring ourselves out for the life of the world - and in this way contributing to the completion, the fulfilment of the whole cosmos. So we conclude where we began, with the liturgy, with eucharist - "those who eat my flesh and drink my blood will have eternal life."

With my love,
David