



*St Luke's in the City*

150 years - 2009

# **Celebrating at the Crossroads**

## **7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**

29 June 2008

### **Liturgy as Transformation**

**WORD: The Gospel**

For the Church, the gospel book is a verbal icon of Christ's manifestation to and presence among us.

Alexander Schmemmann

Scripture scholars refer to a 'canon within the canon'. The word 'canon' means 'rule'. So the canon of Scripture is the rule which determines that certain writings are considered Scripture, while others are not. The earliest followers of Jesus initially had only the Hebrew Scriptures, in most places translated into Greek. Initially, letters by the Apostle Paul began to circulate, then probably ~70CE Mark's gospel was written, followed by the other evangelists. There was no single text, or set of texts. The need to make a canon of Christian Scriptures only arose because of disputes regarding doctrine. What should be regarded as within the canon, and what should be excluded? Several apocryphal gospels were excluded as 'uncanonical'. The letter of Jude and the revelation of St John the Divine only just made it into the canon.

This alerts us to a fundamental principle regarding Scripture, which we Christians inherited from our synagogue forebears. Namely, that we do not regard all Scripture with the same degree of authority. In the synagogue the Torah was the 'canon within the canon', the five scrolls by which all the other scrolls were to be interpreted. So too for we Christians, there are certain texts which are regarded as the rule by which all the other texts are to be interpreted. If we want to know how to read the letters of Paul or John, it is by reference to the canon-within-the-canon. If our reading of Paul contradicts the canon-within-the-canon then we are reading Paul incorrectly. The four gospels are that central canon - the measure, the verbal icon, the benchmark - by which all the other texts of the scriptures are to be interpreted.

Because the Gospels are the canon-within-the-canon they are the benchmark for reading and proclaiming the Living Word in the Christian assembly, the *ecclesia*. When we stand at the beginning of the liturgy it is not for the sake of the priest or other liturgical ministers. No! We stand to receive the canon-within-the-canon, the Gospels. A book of Gospels is our guide, held aloft by the deacon (where there is one), processed into the liturgical assembly.

Similarly, as the quintessence of Scripture, it is the Gospel we stand for. It is the Gospel toward which we bodily turn, symbolising our decision to turn again toward the Gospel. This is why the deacon kisses and censes the book of the Gospels. This is why we make the sign of the cross on our foreheads, our lips, and our hearts, a prayer in action: 'Christ be in my mind and on my lips and in my heart.' Alleluia! 'For the Gospel of Christ.' 'Praise to Christ the Word!'

Fr David Moore