



Changed, but remaining ourselves

Good morning, and a special good morning to AJ who is to be baptised today.

Here is a favourite parable of mine. A man in his fifties suffered a serious stroke and was rushed to hospital. Whilst there he had a near-death experience, during which he encountered God. He asked God if this was it, was it the end for him. God was reassuring and said 'no, no' and told the man he had another 20 years at least to live. You can imagine the impact of that experience.

When he recovered, the man decided to make the most of the second chance he had been given. And he reckoned that his chances of happiness would be increased by some (shall we say) bodywork. So he extended his hospital stay, switched to the Private Wing, and had a face lift, liposuction and BBL, tummy tuck, rhinoplasty and hair transplant. After all this had taken place he felt a new man and was ready to leave and begin what he was certain would be an exciting new life with a new image.

As he walked out of the hospital, preoccupied by the excitement of what lay ahead, he was run over by an ambulance and killed. Finding himself in front of God, shocked and cross, he tearfully exclaimed "I thought you said I had another 20 years at least?" God replied, "I'm so sorry: I didn't recognise you."



Some of us here may have things about ourselves we would like to be rid of or to change. Whether the change we seek is of the exterior, bodywork kind (our outward appearance) or the interior kind (feelings,

thoughts, character, history) it is often the case that we fantasise about being different, being, as we suppose, better.

The wish, at times, is to become someone significantly different to the person we know ourselves to be and with whom in too many ways we are unhappy.

We are just done with the drama of Holy Week. The liturgical year is a contrivance of sorts, a mechanism – the purpose of which is to provide a practical framework for helping us live the Christian life.

We have now left behind the bleeding, broken and abandoned Jesus whose experience on the Cross we contemplated on Good Friday, just over a week ago. We are now into sunnier realms – the metaphor of 'light' is apt; and we are bidden to rejoice. Death has led to life, for 'Christ is Risen' as we say.

Soon after daybreak on Easter morning, a week ago today, we gathered here around the Font, we welcomed the light of the Risen Christ into our lives; renewed our baptismal vows, recalled that in the sacrament of baptism we undergo a death of sorts, and are then catapulted into a new life. We 'die to sin' as the liturgy puts it, and we rise with Christ. By sharing in his death, we believe we share his risen life, his rising. This is inescapably the meaning of Christian baptism. It is no mere 'naming ceremony'.

This is understood by the Church as a radical discontinuity: we stop being one thing and become another. The old is ended, the new begins. And there can't be much doubt that

this is a right way of understanding what the Gospels point to when speaking of being born again in the Spirit and of repentance (to repent is to change, turn around, head in an entirely new direction).

But like many spiritual truths, not all is as it seems.

It is not a matter of change versus continuity but rather of change and continuity. As so often, we need the language of paradox, not logic; and you will remember that paradox (and the ability to think and feel paradoxically) is the 'without which' no serious exploration of faith is possible. (It's why fundamentalists and ultra-rational people can have such a difficult time of it).

Anyway, the point of this takes us back to the man denied his extra 20 years because the changes he had made were so extreme that even God did not recognise him.

It's a joke of course, and I don't myself believe that either the time or manner of our dying is pre-determined. But there could be a truth lurking here. It might be that whilst God invites you to change – sometimes radically and often repeatedly – and to endure many little deaths – God does not want you to cease being you.

What if being just who you are is in some puzzling way of essential importance to God; you, such a small part of the Creation and of history? Now there's a thought to embrace when you are worried about – even hateful towards – those things in yourself you don't like, whether exterior or interior.

The story of Christ is the story of your being loved. Loved beyond measure, treasured as being of infinite value, not in some abstract or general way, but in the very uniqueness that makes you you. Loved in your particularity. Loved by God. We hear that said a lot in church life. It's very difficult to truly comprehend.

It is not some human job lot, yet another product of a human mould, whom we baptise this morning in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit; it is AJ.

And in joyously celebrating his uniqueness this morning, we must also celebrate our own, and one another's.

Please keep that in your mind as we gather around the Font with him and his family. AJ will have both vices and virtues. And if he has any sense (any wisdom) he will seek, as he grows, to deal as best he can with the former and nurture the latter. But he must not seek to present himself before God at the other end of his life in such a form as to be unrecognisable. Grace perfects and completes who we are in Christ, it does not destroy or replace or change us beyond all recognition. We are summoned to be born again, and into that new birth to take with us who we most essentially are.

There is a link here that occurred to me. It's to do with the Offertory during the Eucharist. You know the bit – it's where the bread and wine, along with the money we offer in the collection, are brought to the altar. This is done with a bit of ritual and processional hullabaloo, and the aim of that is to illustrate that we are also offering ourselves – all that we have and are.

But that's just the half of it. Those offerings of bread and wine are not destroyed, nor is their essential character changed, by the ancient prayer of consecration which the Celebrant will later say over them. But they become the vehicle of our communion and another means of grace.

Now, in that is another way of looking at change whilst at the same time remaining recognisable. And it links back to that other bit of perennial wisdom our tradition has for us – that it is in dying that we discover life; it is in losing that we find; it is in giving up and giving out that we both lose and receive.

This is the kind of change that you, me and AJ are all invited to.

You don't need me to tell you what you know from being alive: that this process of change isn't always easy, or steadily incremental or fun.

Change and loss can leave us feeling like our guts have been ripped out; that we have been disfigured, even destroyed. We fear we have become unrecognisable to ourselves and others. Being faithful at such times requires tremendous reserves of courage and hopefulness – and this at those very moments when we have lost a grip on those. That is why friendship, just plain, true friendship and human solidarity and human community is so very essential. They buoy us up when we fear we would otherwise sink.

Life also shows us moments of transcendence; a kind of weightless happiness that comes only from the hand of God touching our lives. There is a place we might reach more than once in life, when we begin to understand that the negative

becomes the route into the positive, that suffering can lead to joy, that Christ's Cross does in very truth lead to Christ's resurrection – not just then but now, and not just for Him but for you – for me – for AJ.

[The Gospel reading today is the well-known account of Doubting Thomas]. Thomas needs to change his PR agency, for he suffers from a bad press. If you have a vacancy for a personal saint, consider him. He wanted to sift all the available evidence as we heard in John's Gospel. Evidence and faith are not opposites, though neither are they the same thing. So consider this summons to change but to remain recognisable (just as the Risen Christ was changed but remained recognisable in the post resurrection appearances, at least for those paying attention and who had their eyes open).

Remember that for love of you a high price was freely paid. That's something to contemplate. For love of you.

Alleluia, Christ is Risen.
He is risen indeed. Amen