

St Mary-le-Bow, Cheapside, London EC2V 6AU

High Mass on The Ascension Day

The Revd George Bush, Rector

Thursday 30th May 2019

The Feast of the Ascension is presented to us as particularly spiritual – although for many it is an actual public holiday, which points to a celebration which is rather muted here in England. The imagery of accomplishment, return and of the heavenly places proposes a spiritual victory which we may read as promise for us, but which most likely does not resonate with our hesitant journey. Here, it seems, is the goal of discipleship if only we would persevere – but it seems hopelessly out of our reach and if anything Ascension projects all our longing on Jesus. This is not wrong for it reminds us that all we have and will know, we have in Christ – with Jesus and with each other.

But the spiritual focus masks that this is a deeply fleshly feast, one with the puppy flesh of Incarnation at Christmas, the mature flesh of adult Galilee health, the feet anointed and the feet washed, the injured flesh of Herod's courts, the dead flesh of Golgotha and the real, if transcendent flesh of Easter. Interestingly the Anglican Eucharistic rite in New Zealand – which superficially seems to be unusually imaginative – talks of the 'encouragement' we are to find in the Ascension. This is perhaps the courage of supported dignity, of the realisation of our flesh as so much more than what we see in the mirror; as now a shared inheritance with God – of muscle, fat, tissue, bone and skin – not so much God made flesh as flesh made God.

Of course Christians have been nervous of flesh, fearful of all that the pagans in the ancient crucible of our faith did with flesh for veneration and cruelty and always realising – with a pre-Freudian incisiveness - that our immediate instincts are as the Prayer Book has it 'naughty'. The last bishop, vested for some magnificent liturgy is said to have been confronted by a protesting woman who shouted, 'all you lot are interested in is your naughty bits'; from which his Chaplain was unable to demur. Eroticism is at one and the same time transgressive, beyond beautiful, reproductive and comic.

And flesh is also the theatre of human relationship; we may cringe from the accuracy of Jesus' dictum that 'the poor you always have with you'; but assuredly we would rather the street homeless did not make that quite so present. The Bow Food Bank which we support, aims to address the fleshly requirement for feeding; the Young Homeless Project which bears our name seeks to deliver security of habitation (and support to make it work) together with employment; and – incidentally - our microfinance initiative currently a little in retreat, seeks to enable ordinary people to develop the skills which will bring them access to healthcare and education. Tactics for sweeping the homeless from the streets in temporary shelters may salve a fleshly conscience but never solve the problem.

I am rather appalled by the cadaver shows presented by Body Worlds and currently running in London and advertised on the sides of buses (and have no idea why they aren't in contravention of legislation concerned with the disposal of human remains; perhaps HM Coroner should intervene). These dead bodies made to look lively, at the very least seem to be in very poor taste. Curiosity about how our flesh works may be necessary but the cult of the

dead body is surely no healthier than the endless obsession with the body beautiful. Our flesh ought to stand as a marker of commonality and not of difference or privilege.

The great Greco-Hispanic artist El Greco famed among much else for his rather elongated (perhaps etiolated) figures seemingly declined to paint fat people and this has been taken to be a sign of his despising of human flesh. In a not entirely unconnected tradition the dictator Generalissimo Franco kept the arm of St Theresa of Avila in his bedroom for devotion. And, still with Spain, seemingly the great vast censer or *butafumeiro* which swings across the nave of the Cathedral at Compostela in defiance of all European health and safety norms, did not do so originally in some extravagant praise of the Almighty, but to disguise the all too fleshly smell of countless unwashed pilgrims at the accomplishment of their *camino*s; pilgrimages across Northern Spain.

At Christmas we sing with gusto in 'Hark the Herald angels sing', 'veiled in flesh the Godhead see'. In fact it's a tad docetic, because Jesus was not 'veiled' in flesh – he was flesh of our flesh; he caught cold, needed food, sleep and comfort, could have been injured or died by reason of accident, illness or disease and did die an excruciating death in the flesh of deep lavatorial indignity.

And now at Ascension that flesh, ours and his is enthroned not as a temporary excursion or a purposeful interlude, but for ever at the right hand of God. And we will be refined and received according to our fleshly living (and how we honour the flesh of Jesus in others). So be encouraged for in his return is ours.