

Form

Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32; Philippians 2:1-13

The image last week of the felling of the Sycamore gap tree is one that has dominated the news. It was one of the most photographed trees in the country and stood in a dramatic dip in Hadrian's Wall for a few hundred years. This section of the wall follows the edge of a cliff where there are several sharp dips caused by melting prehistoric glacial waters. The tree stood in one of these dips with the cliff and wall rising dramatically either side of it. It once stood alongside other trees, but they had been removed over the years. Lonely, isolated, but deeply rooted in the ground. Outliving most of the wall until last week.

I remember visiting the Sycamore gap tree as a schoolboy studying for Higher Latin. We were meant to be concentrating on Housesteads and Roman forts, and the wall keeping hordes of marauding, blue woad-dyed Picts at bay. But like others, we were struck by the perfect shape and form of that tree juxtaposed against the towering human effort of Hadrian's Wall. The *form* of that beautiful tree.

Last weekend during Doors Open Day I reminded the those on the history tour of the church that on ground level it is not straightforward to see some of the largest features of the church. Above our heads is the vast wooden roof, in the form of an upturned boat. The boat is a symbol of the early Christian Church, whose first disciples included amongst their number fishermen from the Sea of Galilee. That we can see if we lean back and look up. But even more important is what an aerial photograph of this building reveals. It is, like other older churches, built in cruciform shape. The long nave and chancel from east to west, and the shorter transepts from north to south. We

worship in a building that takes the *form* of a cross, every week. We are people shaped by the cross, literally.

What might that mean? What might it mean for you to be a people shaped by the cross? What might it mean to be people shaped in the form of Jesus, Whose emblem is the cross, Who took on the form of a servant, and the form of humanity?

It's what Paul writes about in his letter to the church at Philippi. This little house church made up of new Christians in a Roman colony would have heard Paul's letter read out to them during a service. Philippi was the site of the battle where Mark Antony and Octavius, later the Emperor Augustus, defeated the assassins of Julius Caesar, Brutus and Cassius. Philippi was on a major route between East and West, witnessing daily the traffic of commerce, culture and religion. In northwest Greece, it was the first European city where Paul preached the Christian message.

Like all churches it had its problems and its big personalities. Paul has heard about a falling out between two leading women in the church, so he writes pleading that they might be, "of the same mind", and remember that Christian communities are supposed be in the form of Jesus, and look to personal and community interests together. What affects one member, for good or ill, affects everyone. Christians are to look out for each other. The strong looking out for the weak, and the weak looking out for the strong; the old looking out for the young, and the young looking out for the old; the insiders looking out for the outsiders, and the outsiders looking out for the insiders. Christianity, working at its best, isn't about becoming a doormat to the competing needs of those round about. It should look to observe and listen, and work, sometimes through gritted teeth (or is that just me?) to find a compromise that works if not for everyone then for the majority.

That's a lesson not only for Christian churches but all faith communities. It's a lesson for political parties and governments. It's a lesson for those involved on both sides of industrial disputes. It's a lesson for nations at war. It's a lesson for couples going through tough times in their relationship. How annoying is that? This Christianity that asks us to be of one mind, and to attend to the needs and views of others, and where there is disagreement, to work towards amicable and fair resolution. I suspect most of us know that this way is right, but confess to realising that when we believe we are right, it's hard to back down, or see, or listen the views of others.

"Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interest of others...(be) of the same mind..."

Ouch, ouch, ouch!

No wonder Ezekiel, speaking in a different time to different people who regularly went their own way and forgot about God and the way of faith says, *"...get yourself a new heart and a new spirit!"*

That's what it will often take.

Paul wrote that Christians are inevitably supposed to follow in the footsteps in Jesus, and behave, speak and act as He did. The often ironically spiky Indian pacifist Gandhi is reported to have said, "I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ."ⁱ

Ouch, ouch, ouch!

God wants to use the Church, this Church, any Church, every Church, to be the means of accomplishing God's mission of peace, mercy, hope and generosity, salvation, to the world. But it seems clear from within 20 years of the death and resurrection of Jesus, when Paul is writing to the Philippians, to today, that something seems to have gone *terribly* wrong.ⁱⁱ

Paul doesn't want us simply to imitate Jesus, to be veneer Christians, skin-deep, only for show.

Paul wants us to be heart-and-soul Christians, in line with Ezekiel's call for us to get new hearts and new spirits. In line with Jesus Himself Who,

"...though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of me. And being found in human form He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross."

It's a tall order, it's an unrealistic expectation, if we think we are going to do it all on our own. But if we, inspired by the example of Jesus, breathed into by the Holy Spirit, and with people of faith around us looking for our support, and looking to support us, then maybe, just maybe, we'll manage.

We are to take on the *form* of Jesus. Not the physical attributes, but the spiritual ones, the practical behaviours that make Jesus stand out. Jesus Christ presents in human likeness the true nature of God. He shows us what God is like, and what God does, and what God expects, and what God hopes. Jesus, this God with us, came to earth, was born, lived, died and rose again, so that we might see what God wants from us, because of what God offers to us.

This Jesus full of grace, emptying Himself. This Jesus full of the Lordship of Creation, taking on the role of a servant. This Jesus, offering bread and wine in memory of His sacrifice on the cross. This Jesus, dying alone, but rising in glory to give us hope. This Jesus, looking into our faces and hoping to catch a glimpse of the Christian family likeness. This Jesus, looking for our good faith and work and on seeing it, seeing God at work in us and through us.

Is that real? Is that possible? Is that us?

Look at last weekend in this Church. The Doors Open Day, welcoming people in and sharing our story and letting this cross-shaped building speak. The dementia-friendly concert, weaving music into our souls, and finding a place for the vulnerable. The Heart-for-Art exhibition, drawing images and ideas out of the minds and imagination of those who can find words difficult, and showing to us that they are still people. The donations to the food bank, putting into practical Christianity

our help for people who are beyond struggling a few miles for here, who in these days will be able to eat.

Form. The form of Jesus Christ. We were it; we are it; we will be it. In the cross-shaped church.

Around the Jesus-remembering table. Even when we fear it's all lost and gone, it's still here.

The Sycamore Gap tree, felled after 300 years. Is it a symbol of our broken, selfish, twisted world?

Maybe. But there is something else from that story. An expert, noting the health of the felled tree and its roots, even the stump that's left, said it might regrow coppice from the stump. If it can be nurtured, then the *form* of the tree may be different, but it will not be lost.

Might that be an image for God's Church today? Might that be an image of us, as we too seek to take on the *form* of Jesus?

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Gilberto Collazo, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 4, p110

ⁱⁱ Mike Graves, *ibid*, p111