

Trinity XII 2023 8am Homily

*And such trust have we through Christ to God-ward:
Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves; but
our sufficiency is of God;*

My children have a running joke that, each morning, I stand in front of the mirror and say to myself "you're worth it!"

I don't know where this joke came from! It certainly has no grounding in reality . . . Maybe they've seen a Dad-figure on YouTube doing this. In any case, they joyfully tell all and sundry that this is what I do.

Our society is strange. Messages of self-affirmation and encouragement increase in frequency and visibility. Adverts inspire us to be our best selves – of course, using the right products; pop music blares out messages of self-worth and self-love . . .

I'm not the kind of person to grumpily reject all this out of hand. Perhaps our way of life diminishes the confidence of so many people, so that these messages of affirmation have become a necessary antidote.

Many people I meet during my weekly ministry are downtrodden. They are stressed by work bullying, or cost of living pressures; they have poor mental or physical health; and plenty of trauma to work through. The self-affirmation messages go some way towards healing for them. Good.

But the strangeness comes in because these encouraging messages are so often *the reverse image* of our insatiable desire for more and better. They reflect our demands on ourselves . . .

"You've got this!" "You can do it!" "Love yourself" isn't all that far from . . . on your bike, pull yourself up, and if you aren't yet rich, beautiful, or well it might actually be your fault.

We do need to respect and love ourselves, within God's grace. The commandment is, *love your neighbour as yourself*, after all. Without affirming your own dignity, you will never be able to love another.

And yet we suspect that mere self-affirmation only gets us so far. Within it lurks a shadow of what we are trying to escape; the horror that we are self-referential beings, dependent on no-one but ourselves, autonomous, disconnected individuals in a world of similar creatures. Lost. Alone.

Maybe this is why famous people can release songs and adverts encouraging self-love, and yet in their inner lives feel profound sorrow or destruction. Self-sufficiency has its limits.

The good news of Jesus Christ, his life, death, resurrection and reign on high, is never *less* than the affirmation of our dignity and worth. But it is superlatively *more than that*.

By more than we can imagine, God's love for us is so much more abundant than anything we could offer ourselves.

Our *sufficiency* is of God. It arises from knowing deep inside that we are dearly loved. That we exist because the God of boundless love made us to be with God, and to be like God, and to love God.

This is the healing balm that comes to us in our darkest, most difficult, most anxious moments. This gift of our very being, which comes to us from beyond the horizon of ourselves. It *is* affirmation of the self, but it is not just self-affirmation.

It is the ultimate dignity and love, true of every rational creature in the cosmos. And it is in that truth that we Christians live. It is that affirmation we offer to the poor, the hurting, the tired, the stressed, the ostracised; because it is *that* awesome mystery that we ourselves have discovered here.

As we meet Jesus in Bible and Sacrament, we become convinced that we and *all others* are beloved of God.

Because we are made in the image of God and destined to share in God's glory, we are of infinite value. Dare we trust not our *own* imaginings of worth or greatness, but God's declaration that we are worthy. Can we rest in God?

Hear what the great father of the church, Origen of the 2nd century A.D. writes:

"Understand that you are another universe, a universe in miniature, that in you there are sun, moon and stars too. If it were not so, the Lord would have not said to his disciples *you are the light of the world . . .*"

And Gregory of Nyssa, in the fourth century, "You alone have been made the image of the Reality that transcends all understanding, the likeness of imperishable beauty, the imprint of true divinity, the recipient of beatitude, the seal of the true light.

When you turn to God, you become that which he is himself . . . And although he is so great and holds all creation in the palm of his hand, you are able to hold him, he dwells in you and moves within you without constraint, for he has said *I will live and move among them*"

In the name of the Father . . .

Sunday 27th August (Trinity XII) 2023

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God

I've just got back from a fortnight in the USA. And I'm afraid I can't resist showing you some of my holiday snaps. Sorry if you find this kind of thing dull.

I'll only show you a few which I think are relevant to the passage from Romans I've just read; relevant to the theme of *not* being *conformed* to the world but *transformed* in Christ.

You see, I went on an interesting journey, not just geographically but also spiritually.

We started our holiday in small-town Pennsylvania. And just down the road from our friends' home begins Amish country. Lancaster County, PA is home to thousands of Anabaptists and Mennonites.

[Show picture 1] It's obvious that the Pennsylvania Dutch, as committed Christians, don't conform to the modern world. We took a bus tour of their villages. We bought mounds of home-grown produce. We were unable to take photographs of anyone; telephones appear only in outhouses so as to keep the family home free from undue outside influence.

The Amish dress differently, in simple, plain clothes and they usually worship in each other's home. More deeply, all Anabaptists live a life of radical discipleship. They refuse to use violence of any kind and no-one in their community starves. They only attend school until the age of 14.

All in all, they're deeply counter-cultural. They do not conform to the ways of the mainstream Western culture, in which individual self-assertion and achievement are paramount, complexity and sophistication in self-presentation are highly esteemed, and in which we consume an endless number of luxuries.

I was impressed by their way of life. It reflects something I've long desired but almost entirely failed at. As a Franciscan Tertiary, the objects of my own order are to make Jesus known and loved, spread harmony; and live simply. For me this is mostly an aspiration. I want to be transformed by this Christlike way of life, but I'm an absolute beginner – perhaps you are too, and that's ok! But for the Pennsylvania Dutch, they seem to have found a way of living this life well. A way, I say, because in all that I've read, their claims are simple and modest.

They don't reject everything in modern life but, as St Paul teaches in this morning's Epistle, they do *discern* God's will in things. They ask, how will this new technology help people and community to thrive? Will it distract us from loving God and one another? I feel like we could learn a lot from this.

However, in case you're concerned that I'm about to move to Lancaster County, I have to be honest that some aspects of Anabaptist culture challenged me. The Amish take a politically quietist view, meaning that their engagement with local and national politics tends to be sporadic.

And their focus is often internal, on the needs of local area and congregation. Is this really being transformed, or is it another form of conformity to the world? And I wondered what the experiences of women and children *really* are in such closed communities.

If I came away from Pennsylvania thinking about conformity and transformation, feeling a bit unsettled, then as I travelled to the American south this only got more acute!

[Slide 2] As we drove south through Virginia, and into Tennessee, we noticed that the main road was dotted with religious messages. Forgive me if you're one of our beloved American congregation members here this morning. I should say, I love the USA and any critique I make here is one I'd equally apply to my own country and culture! But to me, seeing these signs was a bit of a shock.

These enormous signs seemed, at first glance, to offer the viewer a counter-cultural way of life. As you can see, they call people to abandon sins like adultery, follow Jesus and know the truth. All things we would say are examples of no longer being *conformed* to the world, the secular world in which cheating or lying are infelicities or even justifiable means to an end. And I love the Southern Christian emphasis on directness, kindness, hospitality and personal holiness. These are things I'd want to treasure and share.

And yet, something about this whole setup troubled me too. I know that for some, seeing a call out of a particular habit or sin would be a gift of grace. But this whole arrangement was taking place as I, a wealthy Western man, drove my enormous (hire) car down a massive highway, using up the world's resources in my pursuit of leisure. I found it strange that these personal moral failures were emphasised while leaving the world's unjust economic arrangements intact.

How strange to erect enormous billboards claiming that Jesus of Nazareth condemns or offers a way out of such sins, while living in a way that takes little account of the community Jesus founded! A community in its simplicity and sharing *much* more like the Anabaptist one, or more like the rules of St Benedict and St Francis, than the consumerist-friendly church I inhabit!

And in the South, I found some of the thinking about culture and counter-culture, about conformity and transformation, rather mixed up. There is a subset of wealthy white Americans who claim to be deeply aggrieved by society,

and they fuel hard right politics. Meanwhile their wealth is sustained by the labour of workers, many black and Hispanic.

Some Christians there claim to be deeply against “the world” and its values, for example by opposing abortion or gay marriage, but when it comes to sharing wealth or organising healthcare, they are happy to conform to 21st century capitalism.

None of this is to criticise particular churches, but only to say that both the Anabaptist experience and the complexities of the US South seemed to show that this whole teaching of St Paul’s is much more *complicated* than we sometimes think.

We can all convince ourselves that our discernment is the right one. That we’re appropriately rejecting “the world” by avoiding the right things. Liberals tend to think of these things as bad practices like racism or environmental destruction; conservatives think more in terms of sexual integrity or family life.

But isn’t it more complicated? It was for Paul, and for Jesus too. Paul might demand that the Romans be transformed and not conformed to the world, but he too was a bit of a conformist at times. He accepted some of the gender roles of his time, even while declaring that there was no longer male or female in Christ. Paul tolerated slavery and at times urged people to obey the ruling authorities, even though he saw often these institutions as hostile to the Kingdom of God.

Jesus himself had to negotiate these things, as he engaged Gentile women and told his disciples to pay their taxes to Caesar . . .

If we look closer to home, we can see different discernments of what it means to be transformed in Christ even within our own local area. In Edgbaston, there are Anglican churches where the worship is very modern but the ethics are very traditional. Here, our worship would be seen as very traditional but other Christians see our ethics as progressive, perhaps comfortable with modern culture in a way they find unsettling.

As important as I feel our witness is, none of us has it all figured out. We all need *discernment* of God’s will, and this is an ongoing quest. It’s about reading the Scriptures together, praying, talking and thinking things through. What might we need to turn away from? What does the Gospel call us to affirm and what to challenge? Whether in our personal lives, in the Christian community, or in society at large.

I suggest that there may be different ways to live this dialectic of non-conformity and transformation across different cultures. Our patch of Birmingham is not Pennsylvania or Tennessee, nor is it even the suburbs down the road.

For example, Christians in Five Ways may need to make a stand against excessive car use as pollution chokes our children; while for Christians in the countryside the car may be a lifeline. Christians in Birmingham may need to affirm the dignity of lifelong marriage for all, gay and straight, as a life-giving way in a culture of harmful throw-away encounters; while for cultures in the global south this may not yet make sense.

The criterion is not convenience but the truth of Christ's Gospel. But whatever anyone says, these choices don't make us any less or more conformed to "the world" than other Christians, but just that (like the Anabaptists or the Benedictines) our particular encounter with the Gospel has formed us in a special way. Only God can decide what we have discerned correctly or where we have failed.

Discernment requires dialogue and openness. We need to converse with our fellow Christians and see the surrounding culture through the lens of the Gospel, if we can, through the eyes of Christ. And there is something about learning in all this too, about an attempt to understand. Paul says our *minds*, the understanding part of our selves, will be the key to our transformation. As our minds are renewed by grace we will see and know more clearly the way we should go.

In the name of the Father . . .