Last Sunday morning I found myself framing the sermon with words from the great *Hymn to the Saints of Wales* written by Bishop Timothy Rees. I offered the thought that, despite the experiences of those he ministered to in the trenches, as well as those in his diocese of Llandaff who suffered grievously in the 1930s Depression, he took the saints of Wales as pointing to a constant lode star of hope – in God's will, and in the love of Jesus.

This is what led him to write the following words (which I didn't recite last Sunday):

> *Still thy ancient purpose standeth*
> *Every change and chance above;*
> *Still thy Holy Church remaineth,*
> *Witness to thy changeless love.*

The Church in all its various forms is a human institution, and so it suffers from all those weaknesses to which human beings are prone. If seen just as an institution, it is as full of sin as are its constituent members. Yet Timothy Rees, along with all the great saintly figures of history, believed that the Church is more than that. While being made up of frail sinners, the Church is also the Body of Christ, the sacrament of Christ's enduring presence, and so with him we can say with confidence that God's purpose still stands in our day, and that the Holy Church remains as a witness to God's love which never changes or wavers.

I am offering these Lent Addresses not as a comprehensive survey of Church history, which is obviously beyond the scope of five relatively short teachings, but as a witness to the ways in which God's purpose and God's love has lived and endured in every age – just as that love and purpose lives and endures

today when the human institution is all too aware of its failures and frailties, so much so that it can seem hard to see a future for it.

And in describing aspects of the Church in each age of its past, I will try and single out things from which we can learn today – things we should be doing and don't; as well as things we are doing and shouldn't!

Before I proceed, there is a health warning. Beware of making two related mistakes. The first is to assume that everything in the early Church in particular is pure and should be copied by us today. It wasn't any more pure in reflecting God's love than we are today (read 1 and 2 Corinthians if you don't believe me). What works in one age does not necessarily work in another. The second is to assume that the Church is set on an evolutionary path of constant improvement so that what we do today is bound to be better (or more advanced) than what was done in the past. This, too is nonsense, though it would be nice if it were true. The tendency of human beings to evolve backwards is present in the Church too. We can learn from the past, and do our best today and tomorrow, and that is about it. Except that learning and doing our best are endeavours that never end!

Much of the evidence we have about the first centuries of the Church is in writing – both the writings we call the New Testament, and other records of different sorts. One example is the *Epistle to Diognetus*, the only copy of which was preserved by happy accident, having been used to wrap fish in a market in 1436. Some people date the work as being from 130 AD, thus being one of the earliest testimonies to what Christians believed and how they lived; others date it as much later, but the interesting thing is the way that Christians are described. They live everywhere in the world but they live as if the world is a

foreign land because they belong to God's Kingdom. They are at home wherever they are. They share a common table, but not a common bed. They marry and have children, but they don't kill their children even if unwanted. They love all, and are persecuted by all. They do good, yet suffer all manner of evil.

Like many other similar ancient texts, the *Epistle* goes on to describe in detail the way in which Christians worship, and it gives endlessly complex explanations of the developing theology of how God is present in Christ and in the everyday life of Christians.

The first centuries of the Church are also marked by the sort of formal official persecutions that take place throughout history and are visited on those people who will not confirm to the religious views and practices of the state. The early Church is replete with the names of martyrs who are revered for giving their lives rather than recanting their faith in Christ. There is also ample evidence of an 'underground' Church – most obviously in the various catacombs which still exist in and around the imperial city of Rome.

In the catacombs we find a different sort of evidence for the life and practice of the early Church. Wall paintings show families gathered to celebrate the Eucharist together, with priests and deacons using the tombs of those who are buried there as altar tables. Some of these depictions seem to represent women among those priests and deacons, though it will not surprise you to hear that such interpretations are still hotly disputed. The very common customs of building altars that look like tombs, and interring relics of saints in the altar table, are thought to derive from the practices of the catacombs.

Church organisation seems to have developed quickly following the death and resurrection of Jesus, and we see evidence in the Gospels and in the writings of Saint Paul of the first structures of ministry, leadership and governance. In the writings of John, the Church appears to be led by Elders, and Paul organises *his* churches under the guidance of bishops and deacons – the bishops being successors of the apostles, and the deacons carrying out the role of Stephen and the other seven who were first called to carry out the charitable work and works of service on the apostles' behalf in Acts 7. This appears to have settled quickly into a pattern of bishops governing a large area called a diocese, with the assistance of presbyters or elders covering smaller areas, and deacons again carrying out much of the practical work needed. At the start of the second century, the writings of Clement of Rome and of the martyr Ignatius give witness to this way of organising the Church which has persisted up to today.

There are two other aspects of the early Church I would like to highlight before going on to offer some conclusions. The first is the way matters of doctrine were settled. For the first few centuries of the Church's life, a great deal of effort was put into translating the meaning of Christian faith and the life and teaching of Jesus into a world influenced by the language and philosophies of Greece and Rome. Such questions as the divinity of Christ and the origin of the Holy Spirit were not easy to define, and on top of this there were countless – sometimes weird and wonderful – variations on the nature of salvation and such things as the form of the risen body.

Vicious arguments took place both privately and publicly over such matters, with the worst accusation being that your opponent was a heretic, so wrong in belief that he would end up rewarded by eternal damnation. With the conversion of

the Emperor Constantine in the fourth century, and the adoption of Christianity as the official faith of the state, being a heretic carried the further disadvantage of attracting the same level of persecution once suffered by all who lived by their faith in Christ.

Heresies were usually defined and condemned by universal Church Councils, called initially by the Bishop of Rome as successor to Saint Peter, whom Jesus named as the leader of the apostles, and then called by the Emperor for as long as the Roman Empire lasted. A Statement of Faith (a Creed) would be proposed following the arguments in the Council chamber, and often a set of definitions of wrong belief, called anathemas, would be added on.

The most interesting aspect of this process is the way in which many heresies developed. They would begin with a bit of creative thinking by someone like the priest Arius, who proposed an increased focus on the humanity of Christ. This developed into sometimes quite nasty stand-offs between his followers and his opponents, involving all manner of themes including free-will, the sufficiency of grace and redemption, and ending up with entrenched views, and Arius and his followers condemned as heretics at the Council of Nicæa. There is no actual evidence that Arius himself held the extreme view that Jesus was in essence a limited human being – though many of his followers did teach this – and so the heresiarch (the person identified as starting the heresy) more often than not was not really a heretic himself. Such polarisation of opposing views, started off by a little bit of creative thinking, is a theme that goes right through the history of Christian doctrine, as it does throughout the history of human thought.

The final thing to point out – and this is often forgotten – is that from the start Christianity was present wherever Hebrew, Roman or Greek culture travelled abroad. Those who think that British missionaries were the first to bring the Gospel to a benighted world are very far from the truth. The ancient churches of India, Ethiopia, and the thriving churches of the nations of north Africa, should never be forgotten. Alexandria, in modern-day Egypt, and Hippo, in modern-day Algeria, are only two examples of great centres of learning where the Christian faith was nurtured. The Ethiop and the Moor venerated the Cross of Christ a long time before anything resembling a church was established in these remote islands.

So what can we learn from these few illustrations of the Church in its first few centuries?

Christians were known by their distinctive lifestyle and their regular worship together.

They needed to avoid the tendency to reject creative thought just because it did not say exactly what they expected. The faith they handed down to us in creeds and other teachings developed only in dialogue, even if that became quite heated at times.

They were not restricted to a single cultural expression either in their thinking or in their worship, which was often colourful and could be very long.

They were convinced that when disputes existed they should all gather together to come to a consensus, and then go forward together on that basis.

This address has obviously done little more than skate on the surface of the first centuries of the Church, and if any of it has piqued your interest I would be

more than happy to suggest some further reading. While next week we will be moving on past the fall of the Roman Empire, through the so-called Dark Ages and into the Middle Ages, I will leave you this week with the following prayer by Saint Clement, the Bishop of Rome immediately following Saint Peter:

> ***Give harmony and peace to us and to all who dwell on the earth, just as you did to our fathers when they reverently 'called upon you in faith and trust,' that we may be saved, while we render obedience to your almighty and most excellent name, and give harmony and peace to our rulers and governors on earth. Amen.***

PC, 9th March 2025