Pastoral Letter

Alleluia, Christ is Risen!

“How can you live with yourself?”

This is typically asked as a rather sharp question and is one that will be familiar enough to us. One might say that it has taken on a new connotation in recent times as so many of us have been instructed to self-isolate, while all of us are required to maintain social distancing. These changed and enforced circumstances may well have obliged us to renew our acquaintance with one with whom we have not, perhaps, been, for some time, especially familiar: that is, oneself. In an age that is seen as being increasingly self-obsessed and image conscious (at least in those parts of the world which have the dubious luxury of being able to facilitate the flourishing of a self-regarding culture) it is instructive to observe the widening gap there is between self-preoccupation and self-awareness. A consideration of the alarming rise of mental illness among the young (but not only the young) might compel us to ask the question: What has brought us to this point? From a Christian perspective, this may have a good deal to do with the question of “image”. It does seem that we have become ever more conscious of outward appearances; our consumer economy is to a large extent driven by the framing of a particular set of lifestyles, and posing questions such as: which one of these is yours? Or: to which of these do you aspire? We are then invited to construct a self, an image, from the available options, and purchase those things which meet the lifestyle choice: granted that we have the resources, we can be who we can choose to be; and in recent times, that goes well beyond the question of what clothes we might wear, or what car we might drive, to include issues of gender identity, sexual orientation, and so on. So pressing and pervasive are these issues, that they are a matter of concern even at Primary School level, so our response to them will have implications for the shape of our future society.

To be clear, to remark on these things is not to condemn them, but to offer ourselves the opportunity to ponder them in the light of Christian faith and experience. The Christian is also very interested in the reality of the image. That might seem to be something of a contradiction in terms, as “image” in the popular sense is generally regarded as referring to the superficial- we speak for
example of someone’s “public image”. But the cultivation of the image is for the Christian the very heart of our faith. We believe that human beings are - in that mysterious biblical phrase- made in the image and likeness of God; we believe also that Jesus is the “image of the invisible God”; this means that by looking at Jesus we can begin to know what God “looks like”, and, therefore, also, we can see what a human being should “look like”. As Christians we commit ourselves to growing to be more and more like Jesus- to be changed into his likeness (his image). In the Eastern Church this is called “divinisation” or “theosis” - this does not mean that we are to become little gods (the Lord knows, the world has enough lifeless idols), but we are to participate as fully as possible in the divine life. Part of the malaise that Christ came to heal is our dangerous preoccupation with material things to the exclusion of the spiritual. Beautifully, he overturned this preoccupation (theologically, we call this, at its most extreme, idolatry) by making himself known through the material we inhabit (flesh and blood) and the material we need to sustain bodily life (bread and wine). He shows us what human beings were always intended to be – icons / images of God- that is, persons in whom the divine dwells, and in and through whom God can be encountered.

My friends, these are deep waters! I will continue the discussion in future letters and probably online. Meantime, and for all time, know that you are of infinite value to God, and are deeply loved by Him.

With every possible blessing,
Fr Keith