

## **SERMON FOR TRINITY 12 | 30 August 2009**

**One of the contradictions in our domestic lives is that we always buy a copy of the Radio Times at the week-end - and then complain that there is never, ever, anything decent to watch!**

**Which of course isn't entirely true: there are still lots of programmes which give off that 'feel-good' factor, and one of them is (I think) called 'Secret Millionaires'. Most of you will know the format: someone with pots of money goes into a situation as a minion and spends their time watching hard-up people doing amazing things – caring for old people, working with young trouble-makers on sink estates - with nothing more than time and love. And, low and behold, at the end of the programme the multi-bank sits down with the hero of the situation, reveals who they are, and then hands over a big cheque – usually to floods of tears. And we come away at the end thinking, *isn't it good that there are such fantastic people around in the world?***

**You might think our Scripture readings today are a bit 'heavy' for an August Bank Holiday week-end! Couldn't we have a bright and cheerful miracle or something?! But that is the reason why we try to stick to the Lectionary readings on a Sunday – they force us to read the whole Bible and not just the bits we like!**

**So here we are being faced with the question: *while there are nice people around – like the 'Secret Millionaires' – there are also loads of unpleasant people around too. So where does all that nastiness come from?***

**It's a good question, not least because there is more than a bit in all of us that does the line out of Snow White: *Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?* It isn't just the evil queen who wants to be reassured that we are good and upright, really. The writer of the second reading, from the Epistle of James, knows perfectly well that we all have an enormous capacity for self-deception.**

**Remember that familiar passage from the first letter of St John, often used at Communion services from the BCP: *If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us?* As James says, what is the point of looking in our mirrors, seeing ourselves warts and all, and then instantly forgetting what we have seen? *Be doers of the Word and not just hearers.***

**But we have got diverted: where, we asked, does evil come from? And the answer is often a mixed one: some say, like the writer of I Peter, that *there is a devil who roareth about, seeking whom he may devour, whom resist, steadfast in the faith* (words familiar from the evening service of Compline); the Christian Scientist will tell you that evil is simply a lack of our imagination, the Calvinists will say that all of us are predisposed to sin and need to be saved from it - and others again that good and evil are just different ways of looking at life - like being either an optimist or a pessimist.**

**I think only the first one takes seriously the potential height of human-kind as well as our potential depth - that we are constantly being pulled in two directions at once. Only Christianity faces up squarely to the seriousness of that deep-seated compulsion within most of us to be selfish and angry - which James says makes our religion worthless. The temptations of Jesus are testimony to the truth that even the Son of God was not exempt from the insidious invitation to take things easy.**

**So it no surprise that we Christians often show evidence of trying to have our cake and eat it, in the hope of seeing ourselves through this *time of trial* as the new version of the Lord's Prayer calls Life. So we attempt to hide away what we are really like behind our sweet smiles and regular churchgoing, creating patterns of behaviour which, we hope, will be acceptable to God - but also congenial to us too. And it is this which attracts the withering scorn of Jesus in today's Gospel. Forget the Scribes and the Pharisees for a moment because he is having a dig at us! We can see the context: the teachers of the Law were brilliant at counting the steps they walked on the Sabbath or at going to huge length to make sure they washed properly before their prayers.**

***But what is the point?*** says Jesus. You do all these things in a vain attempt to show how religious you are: but inside you are as nasty as you could possibly be! Your heart and your mind are as cold as charity. Worse still, you think no one notices – and that God can't see the gap between what you really think and what you are pretending to be. So we get the obvious lesson that says that what we say and do, what comes out of our bodies, is what defiles us and not what we put in.

But before we start getting all defensive, we know that getting even these external things right isn't always easy. Wearing a dog collar I suppose I meet these things mostly in the form of jokes: *you can't do that/say that/think that because you are a Vicar*; so drinking alcohol, eating meat, getting cross and earning a bit of interest on my savings have all taken the rap over the years.

So I could keep a tight rein on all of these activities – and more besides; but would it make me a better disciple of Jesus? I could go further: wouldn't it be better if I adopted a whole series of small disciplines which would make me better disposed to God and his purposes – and not just on Sundays!

Doesn't our first reading from Deuteronomy make it abundantly clear that there are laws and customs which we must obey? *You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take anything away from it, but keep the commandments of the Lord God with which I am charging you.* Driving through Stamford Hill on Wednesday, among the Orthodox Jewish community in their hats and shawls, I asked myself whether I wasn't just too lax for words?

But Jesus is spot on as usual. There is nothing inherently wrong with hand-washing, for example, especially during these days of swine flu! But if it becomes an over formalized ritual and we lose touch with the reasons for doing it, it become nothing more than a routine, devoid of any useful meaning. Worst still, it can lead to that dreadful kind of judge-mentalism that nit-picks over whether something is being done 'correctly' or not. I'm afraid religious people are dreadful for that: just listen to people commenting on services they have attended in other Churches!

**And so, today, we are being gently led to ask the fundamental question: what is the place of Tradition in our worship?**

**Tradition is a funny kind of portmanteau word. Talk to Bob or any organist and they will tell you that when they ask someone which tune they should play for a hymn, they are often told *O, the traditional one!* Which tradition; in which Church? What is traditional in one place will be unknown in another; and we all know how quickly a tradition can be set up: *we've done it for years* someone says – *well, since last year at least!***

**Now I am not knocking Tradition (with a capital T), far from it. The word Tradition comes from the Latin verb to *pass on* and refers to teaching which has been approved and tested over the years - which is why it is generally given greater respect than those things which are newer. It is Tradition that allows for the passing on of our Christian identity, giving proper respect to the way in which the Gospel message has unfolded here in the past. But how do we distinguish between what is indispensable and essential to our self-understanding, and what has *just always been done* – for no other reason than habit or even, dare I say it, an obsessive urge not to change anything?**

**The French philosopher, Paul Ricoeur, had a useful maxim. He said: *it is only by reinterpreting what we have that we can learn to believe again.* It's a powerful thought: simply put, it is only when we have re-examined what we have that our experiences and our relationship with God can be re-ignited and enabled to flourish.**

**And that we do by allowing God's explosive (but essentially life-giving) Spirit to flow among us so that we will learn to examine and then release our grip on those Traditions which have lost their usefulness. As St Paul said to the Galatians, we must crucify our lower natures with all their abilities for self-deception – however comfortable/familiar they have become over the years!**

**Of course no new direction can be decided in advance and facing who we really are and what we are really like is tough; but it is ultimately the only way for us to grow - and to grow together.**