

Sermons, Speeches & Addresses

Sermon for Ash Wednesday
13th February 2013



There are very few words that are made up of the five vowels in alphabetical order. One of them is “abstemious”. A Lenten word. This is the season for us to become abstemious. It is the season of abstinence. Traditionally it is a time of giving things up. The problem with abstinence is that it gives the impression that what you are abstaining from is somehow not quite pure, slightly imperfect and definitely not as good as the things of the Spirit. This has down the centuries led the Christian faith into something of a cul-de-sac.

In this dead end place Christians are seen to despise the material world. The result is that Christianity finds it difficult to engage with expressions of the material world – the arts, politics and sexuality.

That is why I love the Collect for Ash Wednesday for it contains a corrective for any who are seduced by that false theology which denies the original goodness of God’s creation so manifest in the opening poem of the Book of Genesis where God creates and declares all to be good and very good.

“Almighty and everlasting God who hatest nothing that thou hast made”.

So just in case anybody here thinks that by embarking upon a Lenten discipline you are subscribing to a theology that despises God’s world the Collect reminds us of the biblical truth that God hates nothing that he has made.

This is such a glorious affirmation at the beginning of Lent. Indeed one of the results of being abstemious and abstaining from what could be called “the good things of life” is that it makes us appreciate their worth all the more. It is not just absence but abstinence which makes the heart grow fonder! Fonder of God’s creation. Giving up chocolate, refusing alcohol, reducing our carbon footprint should make us appreciate the goodness of God’s creation.

But abstinence can touch us at an even deeper level. Not only can a wrong theology lead us to despise God’s goodness it can make us think that the one who desires such things must themselves be despicable. When the prayer book tells us that God hates nothing that he has made it is telling us in no uncertain terms that we too are included in the sweep of that divine love.

Again, in the history of Christianity there has been an inculcation of self-hatred because of our awareness of selfishness and sin especially as we stand in the searching light of God’s own goodness and holiness.

But as the Collect goes on to show, “He dost forgive the sins of all them that are penitent”. We must never hate ourselves because God never hates that which He has made especially those made in his own image and after His own likeness. The cross itself is the demonstration that God loves us so much.

The Ash Wednesday Collect helps us to pray further, “Lord, I thank God that you do not despise me for you hate nothing and no one whom you have made”.

In the Chapel of Bishop’s Lodge there hangs a familiar icon, Rublev’s ‘The Holy Trinity’, the three persons of the Trinity are set around a table in the middle of which there is a dish with the head of a sheep or a lamb. People read in and out of this icon many interpretations. As I was meditating upon it one day, indeed while I was listening to one of Rachmaninov’s vespers I suddenly saw something in the icon that I had never imagined before. I saw the three persons of the Trinity contemplating the lamb that would be slain for the sins of the world. It crossed my mind how in eternity there might have been a discussion amongst the three persons of the Trinity as to which one of them would choose to become the Lamb of God and give his life as a sacrifice for many.

Would the Father do it, would the Spirit do it, would the Son do it? All three persons of the Trinity are united in love for the world. The love of Jesus Christ is inestimable because before the foundation of the world he was not only chosen but chose to be the Lamb of God that would take away the sins of the world, the sins of the ones whom God made in His image, the ones to whom He declares even to this day never to hate because He has made them.

So as you and I come forward to be ashed to be reminded of our sinfulness, the ash of the palm of the cross is not simply a sign of our penitence but of our loveliness in the sight of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit who before the foundation of the world made provision for our forgiveness as the Son was chosen and chose to be the Lamb of God.

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