

“They give forth fragrance”

**Gleanings from the 2008 Sermons
of the Reverend Dr Martin Dudley
Rector of Saint Bartholomew the Great, Smithfield
in the City of London**

This is a collection of extracts from sermons that I have preached at Saint Bartholomew the Great during 2008. Inevitably those preached after 15 June — the day on which the media began their coverage of the events that followed on from the blessing of the civil partnership of Peter Cowell and David Lord — reflect some of my thinking on the issues that were involved. One sermon, the one preached at the Eucharist on 20 July, is given in full [under the heading of “Schism”].

Angels

The angel who came to Zechariah delivered his message and departed. So again Gabriel after make the announcement to Mary departed. “And the angel departed from her,” says the Gospel. In other words, Gabriel gave the message, Mary said OK, though with greater dignity than that, and she was left pregnant, with the responsibility of explaining her state to Joseph and her kinsfolk. In fact, there is a strong sense in Luke that she was sent off to the hill country, to her cousin Elizabeth, because her pregnancy was a bit of an embarrassment. When the angel appears to the shepherds, he has his say, is joined by the heavenly host and then they all “went away from them — *the shepherds* — into heaven.” Angels don’t stay around. They are messengers; they say what needs to be said and depart. On that basis Christina Rossetti’s doubts¹ are justified; maybe they didn’t gather there, maybe they didn’t throng. They prefer the presence of God to the presence of corporeal beings or composite creatures. They may even wonder — if they are allowed to wonder — why God who is spirit is getting tied up with flesh. They say it is a great joy, because they have been told to, and for human beings it is, but the angelic beings must surely ask why any spiritual being would want to be composite — embodied, enfleshed, incarnated. Why not just stick with being spirit, winging it around heaven, with none of the problems that come from flesh. [Christmas Midnight Mass]

Anxiety

“Now I am weary,” writes Petrarch, “and I take the blame for that great error which all but destroyed the seed of good; my final years, O God, I consecrate to You, I hope in time — sad and repenting of such years spent thus, better directed to the better goal of fleeing trouble and of finding peace.” It is hard to date the poems of the *Canzoniere*, but this is the last but two and its very content suggests that it belongs to the latter years of Petrarch’s life — he was seventy when he died in 1374. It is poetry and we need not assume that all poetry is literal truth. Yet Petrarch expresses in his writing, as in his life, the agony of choice, the confusion of earthly and heavenly desires, and the themes of guilt and repentance, of days spent in deliberations and

¹ I don’t think she really had any doubts when she wrote “*Angels and archangels may have gathered there*”; the main point is that Mary kissed the baby.

bitterness, of a life apparently wasted in the pursuit of mistaken goals. Petrarch has been called the first modern man to emerge from the medieval world: modern in his perplexities, his uncertainties, the hesitations and diffidence he reveals. He describes himself at the beginning of the Secret Book, as lost in thought, considering his coming into the world and his departing from it, “wide awake with anxiety”.

Baptism

“So those who welcomed his message were baptized.” The message was Peter’s proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ. It is rooted in the events of the first Easter — the betrayal, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. It is rooted in divine action — God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified. It requires a response. You can reject the message. You can deny or belittle the message. You can dismiss it as inconsequential. But Peter says that it has consequences. If you welcome the message, and repent; if you are baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, then your sins are forgiven and you receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. [Third Sunday of Easter at the Eucharist]

Beauty and Peace

At the annual remembrance service for the City of London Yeomanry I spoke of the “beauty of war” as illustrated in Homer’s Iliad.

The only route to peace in our world is another kind of beauty, a way of illuminating the shadows of human existence without recourse to the flame of war, to give powerful meaning to things and events without having to place them in the blinding light of death. And there is so much beauty in the world, in every land and every culture, if people can turn away from the fatal light. And there is much that can engage human energy, and draw on inner resources, and require strength and courage, and even heroism, without it leading to the multiple monuments to myriad deaths, whether caused by war or by daily acts of gratuitous violence on our city streets. [19 October Mattins]

Body and Soul

We are not divided into soul and body. The soul is the shaping principle of the matter that becomes our bodies; this body is my body shaped by my soul. Souls and bodies are not interchangeable. Jesus is not just here for the soul; he is here also for the body. Our bodies and souls must be in harmony so that we are kept both outwardly in our bodies and inwardly in our souls, for together they make up who we are. Traditional devotion dedicates the body through ritual action with the purpose that the body should be the lively vehicle for the soul. We are embodied beings and more than that — we believe in the resurrection of the body and that means, very simply, that the body and its actions are truly important. [Lent IV Eucharist]

During June I preached a short series at Evensong on the body. See also “Old age”.

In its foundation documents Christianity has no concept of ritual uncleanness, and prayers such as those that ask God to keep us “both outwardly in our bodies and inwardly in our souls” suggest a duality that insulates to some degree the one from the other. [15 June 2008 Evensong]

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the Apostle Paul finds that there is a war going on within us in his reference in Romans to being freed “from this body of death”. And yet it is Paul who develops a theology of the body and a theology of the Church as analogous to a body. He speaks of the many members that make up the body, each of which is different, all of which are necessary, and in a rather difficult couple of verses he refers to the weaker parts of the body, to those which we think of as “less honourable” and also to the “unpresentable parts” — Greek *ασχημονα*, unseemly, Latin *inhonestus*, shameful, unseemly or repulsive. It is Paul too who explains the theology of resurrection, of the seed that perishes and which in perishing gives rise to new life — sown in dishonour, raised in glory, sown in weakness, raised in power, sown a physical or natural body, raised a spiritual body. “Now this I say, brethren,” writes Paul in the passage that belongs to the Prayer Book Burial Service; “now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; neither doth corruption inherit incorruption.” And the Prayer Book itself, in Archbishop Cranmer’s own words, says, at the grave, as earth is cast on the body, that our Lord Jesus Christ “shall change our vile body, that it may be like unto his glorious body”.

Hard as it is for us to accept it, the Judaeo-Christian tradition has scant regard for the body, and places little value on it, except it seems for one person, and that is Jesus — Jesus who heals the sick and gives sight to the blind, cleanses the lepers, feeds the crowds, and gives huge quantities of wine to the wedding guests, Jesus who is unconcerned by blood or saliva, Jesus who gives his own body to his disciples as real food. Paul the Jew, unable to throw off completely the legal tradition of uncleanness, Paul who labels parts of the body God has created as unseemly, seems to have distorted the high doctrine of physical well-being that we glimpse, but no more than glimpse, in the life and teaching of the incarnate God. And that is the real point: God is incarnated, enfleshed, embodied. How can the body and its functions be shameful in any way if God has become incarnate? [22 June Evensong]

Christ

Easter is part of our lives as Christians and, no less importantly, part of our deaths as well. Baptised into Christ in his dying, we will also rise with him, and living is a process of assimilation into Christ. Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ of God, is a real embodied person. In the period between Christmas and Easter we are acutely aware of that. We see him, we hear his voice, we know his touch. There is nothing remote about him. There he is, tired and thirsty, talking to the Samaritan woman at the well. There he is making a paste with dust and saliva to spread on the eyes of the blind man. There he is overcome by emotion as he stands with the weeping sisters before the tomb of his friend Lazarus. And we have suffered with him, in his betrayal, in his agony, in his crucifixion.

The real presence of Jesus changes with the resurrection and changes further with his ascension and glorification. He may seem more remote. He can be obscured by our words about him, our explanation of what he stands for, our counter-cultural critique of the world in which we now live. Last Sunday I felt overwhelmed by words. They were good words — the words of the liturgy, the Bishop’s words of encouragement to us and to those who were baptised and confirmed. If you missed it, you can see but not hear him on the website where a few photographs evoke our Bishop’s presence

with us. And yet there were too many words and they may have obscured the signs, the actions — washing, anointing, blessing, taking bread and wine. It was a relief to me at the end of evensong to kneel in silent adoration before the Eucharistic Christ, Christ present in the consecrated bread, the hidden saviour, ever present. I felt the need to heed the words “Be still, and know that I am God.” [Sixth Sunday of Easter at the Eucharist]

Christian Faith

In a sermon in late September I raised the question of the earliest Christian profession of faith and explored Paul’s formula “Jesus is Lord” as expressed in the Letter to the Philippians—

This is the very kernel of Christian faith, the reason why we are called Christians. But Paul is not interested in a simple definition of faith; he pushes us to see its implications, the effect that this belief has on our attitude to the world, on who we are and how we live. He wants us to be in Christ, to be so closely identified with the Lord Jesus that his pattern of thinking becomes our way of thinking — have the same mind in you that was in Christ Jesus. This identification is much more than that which comes from embracing a teaching. It is about belief *in* a person, a belief that makes us one with that person. Christian belief has this element of mystical unity, of becoming one with Christ. That is why there is a reference to the heart, the core of our being. Faith is not merely a cerebral thing, a process of rational evaluation of conflicting belief systems, ideologies and philosophies. It touches the heart, the inner being, and only when it is the Spirit that does the touching, when we allow the Spirit in, only then can we say, with fear and trembling for what it means, Jesus is Lord. After that, when we have said, however hesitantly, “I believe”, then we have to work out, as Paul says, our own salvation. He doesn’t mean that we somehow achieve that salvation ourselves, working at it, but we work out what it means or, better still, allow God to work in us. And one thing I am quite clear about — if we think we have pinned it down, sorted it into categories, systematised it, stuffed it in the box, then we are always totally wrong, for the saving work of God is always greater than our reason and our imagination, and God will break out of any system by which we seek to enclose him for Jesus is Lord and is not subject to any human system. When we grasp that we might just begin to understand the truly revolutionary nature of the Christian faith and its profession of the absolute lordship of the one who humbled himself and became obedient unto death. [28 September Eucharist]

Being Christian involves at least these three things: faith, devotion and action. The term “faith” here encompasses belief in the person of Jesus Christ and belief about him as God incarnate, Son of God and Lord. So it means faith in the sense of “having faith in” as well as the content of the Christian faith set out, in longer or shorter form, under the heading “I believe”. “Devotion” encompasses both public worship and private acts — reading the Bible, prayer, meditation, spiritual reading, being silent before God — together with those that cross the public-private line, such as confession and spiritual direction. Crossing yourself, using holy water, reverences to altar and sacrament, lighting votive candles, are all devotional acts, combining prayer and some external expression of inner intention. “Action” concerns the way in which our faith and our devotion shape our behaviour and our choices in life, how we give concrete form to our love of God and neighbour. [Lent I Eucharist]

What is the content of the Christian faith? It is faith in Jesus Christ, the son of God: faith in the redemption of the world by his saving action; faith in his cross and resurrection, faith in the Lord who lives on in his Church. This is the Easter faith, the light that shines in the world's darkness. Christ in his entirety is the sole content of our faith.

A man wrote to me the other day, furious about our introduction of charging for visitors. Shame on you, he wrote, and proceeded to heap many sorts of abuse on me, calling me high-handed on the one hand and pusillanimous on the other. He reckoned he had seen my pale anaemic and ashamed face lurking in the church. He told me, to reinforce his point, that he attended St John the Baptist's Church in such-and-such a place, and that he served on the PCC. A letter like that would be enough to put you off Christianity and church, except for one thing. It was clear that this man was not a Christian. A Christian would never have written a letter like that. Someone in whom Christ dwells could not have treated another human being in that way, disregarding entirely love of neighbour, prayer for enemies, and the need to forgive faults, real or imaginary, in order to be forgiven. This man was no Christian.

Don't let the unchristian put you off Christianity! Don't let the people who cloak themselves in religion and self-righteousness dissuade you from faith in Jesus the Christ who breathes his life into the Church and in that life forgiveness of sins and peace. More than that, let it reinforce your faith; let it make you keener to think and act in accordance with the loving example that Jesus gives, and where you can promote the bond of peace. Don't let the cynic, the scoffer, the mocker distract or deter you. Be childlike in your faith, turning with open arms to the one who provides spiritual nourishment. Combat the enemies of joy, using the weapons given to the Christian, the weapons of faith, hope, and love, together with real confidence in God. For our doubts and uncertainties are addressed by Christ who says to us today "Put your finger here and see the marks of the wound, and be not doubting but believing." Alleluia. [Low Sunday at the Eucharist]

Communion of Saints

The first thing I noticed as I looked at today's readings, psalm and other texts, was the alleluia that will be sung at the Solemn Eucharist: *Venite ad me omnes qui laboratis, et onerati estis: et ego reficiam vos*. It has become a favourite text of mine in recent months and you know it well: Come unto me all that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you. They are the first of the so-called *Comfortable Words* in the Prayer Book order for Holy Communion, and here they are as the alleluia for the feast of All Saints. This may seem a little odd. All Saints' may feel like a mopping up operation: there are more saints to celebrate than days in the year, so the feast enables us to give thanks to God "for all the saints who from their labours rest", both those known to the churches and those whose sanctity is known to God. But the alleluia is an invitation to *all* and the beatitudes read as the Gospel refer not to courageous witnesses, the martyrs and confessors and those leading consecrated lives of poverty and chastity but the poor in spirit, the mourners, the meek, those hungry and thirsty for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers and the persecuted — and the alleluia text broadens it yet further, all who labour, all who bear heavy burdens, to whom Christ offers refreshment. The gate doesn't look so narrow, the road seems broader;

we may yet find ourselves in the communion of saints. [All Saints' Day at the Eucharist]

Community

I want you to notice that again we are concerned not solely with the individual but with the community. The testing of an individual within the Church is, in a way, a testing of the whole community. A challenge to a Christian is a challenge to the whole Church, for we are the Body of Christ and all of us members of one body. And no one can watch all the time. The watches of the night are organized with one guard relieving another, allowing one to sleep while another watches. So it must also be with the vigilance to which Christ calls us in today's Gospel. [Advent Sunday at the Eucharist]

Confession

Our confession of the failures of thought, word, and deed, is not intended to be merely a statement of fact: there we are, that's how we are, unreliable, ineffective, devoid of all health. It leads to a plea for mercy, for forgiveness, for newness of life. [Passion Sunday at the Eucharist]

Cross of Christ

And when we are there, at the foot of the cross, looking at him whom they pierced, we should remember that and pray that the word of life may so dwell in us that we may not be noisy gongs and clanging cymbals but the means by which that word, the effective word of God, is active in the world that needs it so much. [Passion Sunday at the Eucharist]

On Holy Cross Day (14 September) at Evensong I looked at the hymns of Venantius Fortunatus concerning the cross of Christ—

The meaning of the Cross is not exhausted by its multiplication as jewel and ornament around the neck of believer and unbeliever alike, nor by its over use in churches, not by being gilded and enclosed in reliquaries, processed and venerated. The Holy Cross of Christ speaks of human tragedy and divine love, of the fatal fruit of Eden's tree, and the Creator's marking of a tree that would undo that harm. It speaks of how the instrument of death can be the means of life and how Christ died for humankind. There was a third hymn on the Cross by Fortunatus — *Crux benedicta*, the blessed Cross. There he speaks of the gentle victim and his kindly love, of pierced hands that deliver from destruction, and a death that closes the road to death and, as he turns to describe the foliage and the fruit of the saving tree he completes the circle — Among your branches hangs the vine from which blood-red sweet wine flows. The true vine is lodged on the cross, an endless source of sweet nourishing wine, and cross of death becomes the source of life.

Death

Jesus ben Sirach, writer of the book known either as Sirach or as Ecclesiasticus, a volume of wisdom literature dating from around 132 B.C., has this to say about death: "O death, how bitter is the reminder of you to one who lives at peace among his

possessions, to a man without distractions, who is prosperous in everything, and who still has the vigour to enjoy his food!” Perhaps it was just such a man that was in the mind of the Lord Jesus when he told the parable of the land of a rich man which brought forth plentifully, such that the man faced the dilemma of lack of space in which to store his crops. “I will pull down the existing barns,” he said, “and build larger ones, and there store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink, be merry.’ But God said, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’” “A man’s life,” said Jesus, “does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.” This man was not, of course, the only rich man to die suddenly and unprepared, unwilling to consider the possibility of death. The same happened to the rich man, clothed in purple and fine linen, who dined sumptuously every day, and had Lazarus, the poor man, at his gate. We, at least have, in addition to the words of Jesus, those of Paul to Timothy, enshrined in the Prayer Book funeral service : “We brought nothing into this world, and it is certain — *it is certain* — we can carry nothing out.” Incidentally, the same passage of Paul is a salutary one to read in the City at this time: “Those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and hurtful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction — for the love of money is the root of all evils.”

So the reminder, just the reminder, of death is bitter for the wealthy and the prosperous. But Jesus ben Sirach has more to say. “O death, how welcome is your sentence to one who is in need and is failing in strength, very old and distracted over everything; to one who is contrary, and has lost his patience!” *Qui perdit patientiam!* I like that; it is such a good description of our inability to cope any longer with life. Patience — forbearance under provocation — is a virtue. That is the case. St Thomas Aquinas said so. *Summa Theologica, secunda secundæ* — the second part of the second part, question 136, art. 1 “Whether Patience is a Virtue?” It is a virtue opposed to sorrow. The sorrow of the world worketh death, says the Apostle, and Jesus ben Sirach says “Sadness hath killed many, and there is no profit in it.” So, says Aquinas, we need a virtue to safeguard the good of reason against sorrow, lest reason give way to sorrow: and this patience does. It is therefore evident that patience is a virtue. And if our patience is lost, we are no longer able to bear evil with an equal mind, and we seek to abandon what is good! What insight the ancient writers have and how we neglect them, running after the fashions of the day. What insight Sirach has into the desire to die, the desire to be free of life when it becomes a burden. How clearly he sees the transition from death as the unwelcome visitor, the grim reaper, to the idea of “most kind and gentle death” which we find in W.H. Draper’s rendering of Francis of Assisi’s *Canticle of the Sun*. [November 9 at the Solemn Requiem]

Diversity in the Church

“No one comes to the Father,” says Jesus, “except through me.” And he says also “I am in the Father and the Father is in me.” We also believe that there is one God and that the nature of the divinity is revealed, by the divine will, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But this revelation does not come through the words of a prophet or the visions of mystics; it comes in and through the person of Jesus of Nazareth, whose passion and death and whose glorious resurrection have filled our hearts and minds for more than a month now. “Believe in God,” says Jesus, “believe also in me.” He is saying this before his resurrection, in the discourses to his disciples. He does not

say to them directly “I am God”, for that is simply not how Jesus works. He leads the disciples step by step towards greater understanding. There were twelve of them in his immediate circle and each of them was at a different stage, with differing expectations, differing ability to grasp the teaching and understand parable and miracle. Diversity is at the heart of the Church because everyone perceives Christ in a unique and personal way but, when it overlaps sufficiently with that of the community of faith, each person is able to profess the faith of the Church. [Fifth Sunday of Easter at the Eucharist]

Eucharist

Sharing a meal with Christ is a sacramental sign of our relationship to God. Jesus, in multiplying bread and fish and in turning a huge quantity of water into wine, ushers in a new creation. Neither food nor drink, neither love nor mercy nor forgiveness are to be rationed in the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus transcends. Jesus transforms. Jesus pushes us beyond visible forms to invisible realities. He says “I am the bread that came down from heaven”; they say “We know his father and mother.” We say that the little white disk held in the hands of the priest, placed in the monstrance, is Christ in his Eucharistic presence. The reply might come — it is made in a factory, comes in a box, bears scant resemblance to bread and even less to Christ. We know where it came from; we know what it is. But faith befriends our senses, faith refines our knowledge, faith directs us from outward and visible signs to inner, spiritual realities. And the eucharistic bread which communicates Christ’s presence also directs us away from earthly signs and towards heavenly realities. This movement — from heaven to earth on God’s part, from earth to heaven on our part — is an essential characteristic of the sacramental system, the system of signs addressed to us, not at the level of intellect, where truth is apprehended by reason, but at the level of faith, of simple child-like trust in God. “My flesh is food indeed.” “Take and eat, this is my Body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” We eat with our minds not fixed on the bread but fixed on Christ from whose hands we receive this spiritual food. [Corpus Christi at the Eucharist]

Following Jesus Christ

What were the needs that Jesus saw in the people that he encountered during his ministry? First, he proclaimed the good news of the kingdom and brought healing. So the first needs he addressed were those of hope in the midst of hopelessness and health in the midst of disease. Then he turned to teaching, to knowledge of God as loving and merciful, to knowing how to pray and what to pray for. There would be times when Jesus would see that the crowds need food as well as teaching, and he met those needs to. And over and over again — and I shall return to this tomorrow — he perceived the need for forgiveness.

The crucial question here seems to be did these people, these others, know what their real needs were? We can see from the gospel narrative that the sick often sought for Jesus, because they knew that he could meet their need for healing, but they did not always understand the need in the way that Jesus himself understood it. He what forgive their sins as a necessary part of them being healed. Indeed when Jesus washes the disciples’ feet he warns Peter saying “You do not know what I am doing, but later

you will understand” — so Jesus was meeting a need that Peter didn’t even know he had.

Now we are clearly heading into dangerous territory here, for Jesus could perceive these hidden needs and respond to them, but we are not claiming for ourselves, for the Church or for the clergy, that knowledge that belongs to Christ. And yet the needs of others that we are here to meet must be real needs and ones that the service of Church and clergy can serve. And when I say “Church and clergy” I mean that all baptised Christians are called to this service, though the ordained are set apart for it, and trained for it, in a special and specific way. The Passiontide blessing points to the needs we are here to meet — Christ crucified draw you to himself that you may find in him a sure ground for faith, a firm support for hope, and the assurance of sins forgiven. The Church is the medium for communicating Christ and the needs we serve are those for faith — in God, in Christ, in oneself, in humanity, in a future worth having — hope which is not in itself vain or for vain things but the hopefulness that looks forward with eager anticipation, the hope that assures us that all will be well — and finally, and a theme that I shall, as I said, pick up tomorrow — forgiveness for a world where so many or at enmity with others.

If the Church, the community of the faithful, clergy and laity together, can serve these needs, not in itself or for itself, but for others, then something has really been learned from the example of Jesus Christ, who washed his disciples’ feet. [Maundy Thursday at the Solemn Eucharist]

Forgiveness

So we are not without sin, not without our debt to God. And God makes an engagement with us, a covenant. In this agreement we hear the Lord God say, Forgive, and I will forgive. If you do not forgive, then you, not I, retain your sins. There is no way out of this. No argument will resolve it. Forgive and you will be forgiven. It doesn’t say that we need only forgive if the person who has offended us has repented and asked forgiveness. It doesn’t say that we have time to resolve the personal and psychological issues involved. It doesn’t say that there is a category or a series of categories of offence that are exempt from forgiveness. Whenever you stand praying, says Jesus, forgive, if you have anything against anyone — *anything* against *anyone* — so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses. [Good Friday at the Solemn Liturgy]

I find it hard to forgive. When I think of Jesus, of his feet upon the road, of his hands blessing, breaking bread, touching the sick, washing the feet, then I find, when we hear the story, when the Passion is sung, when we adore the Cross, that sorrow and anger mingle: sorrow for what he endured, anger at those who caused it. I have known that sorrow and that anger since I first understood the story. It is overlaid now with theology, with devotion, with the words and actions of the liturgy that allow the sorrow and anger to be worked through, but also, and more importantly, that provide context and meaning. The Scripture had to be fulfilled. The sacrifice to be made. Jesus of Nazareth hangs on the tree. He is lifted up as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness. He gives his life that we might have eternal life. [Good Friday at the Solemn Liturgy]

One of the fruits from the tree of Christ's Passion is forgiveness, a forgiveness we all need and can all receive if we are ourselves able to forgive. [Good Friday at the Solemn Liturgy]

Friendship with God

Francisco de Osuna, a Spanish Franciscan priest who exercised a significant influence on Saint Teresa of Avila, assured the readers of his *Third Spiritual Alphabet* that "friendship with God in this life is possible and not so very difficult and that love between the soul and God is even more intimate than that between the highest ranking angels." He goes on to tell us something else, because he wants us to understand that this friendship, this love, is possible. He knows how human beings operate, how they try to wriggle out of things, how they will use pretexts and excuses not only in dealing with other humans but in dealing with God. You can say, about some religious act, weekly presence at the Eucharist say, that it doesn't suit you, it's not convenient, you're not a creature of habit, there are so many other important things to do, you have to travel, you are not well, there are friends to visit and so on. And the book of Proverbs says "He who is estranged seeks pretexts to break out against all sound judgement." Such excuses may satisfy you but they are just excuses; if you wanted to, you could. You could say you are unable to fast, or to spend long hours in prayer, or to do hard and demanding work or even to walk, and you would be believed, but if you claim that you are unable to love, this is neither acceptable nor believable, for it is a capacity, an ability that comes with being made in the image of God. It is a God-given gift. And how can we deny anything to one we love, and will we put the love of pleasure or even the love of creatures before the love of God, who offers far greater reason for our love?

Grace

The grace of God works with and strengthens our nature. It does not erase what is there but reforms it where necessary and builds upon it. And the effective word of God can dwell in us, and we can be its channel and agent. We see something of what this means in today's Gospel. Mary and Martha are not passive onlookers in this story. Martha, the practical, active one, knows that Jesus has not come just to weep impotently at the tomb of his friend Lazarus. She perhaps knows as well that in the absence of faith the earthly Jesus cannot perform miracles. But Martha is confident — "even now," she says, "even now God will give you whatever you ask of him." Jesus tells his disciples that the same is true of us, when we ask in his name — then God will hear us and give us whatever we ask from him. We may believe it but we don't much act as if we do. [Passion Sunday at the Eucharist]

Grace and forgiveness

Paul has a problem; Jesus created it for him. Jesus has no time for those who use the detail of law to frustrate the doing of good. So what if it is the Sabbath? says Jesus, God made the Sabbath for man, he didn't make man for the Sabbath — so if I encounter sickness, I will not hesitate to heal on the Sabbath Day. "Why do I eat with sinners?" says Jesus, because it is the sick who need a physician not the healthy. And when he forgives the woman who washes his feet with her tears, he points out that a

capacity for love, even if wrongly directed, involves a capacity for forgiveness. This is where Jesus creates a dilemma for Paul. [6 July 2008]

Holy Spirit

But the action of the Spirit is not there simply to promote our growth, our holiness and our adherence to Christ. Salvation in Jesus Christ has meaning for the whole creation; it has universal significance. We do not grasp the full meaning of this, for we have not allowed the Spirit to be unfettered, working within us without constraint or restriction. We have limited the Spirit in so many ways, perhaps because we are afraid of it — afraid of the secret power of God. “How I wish I had burning coals to set your hearts on fire,” said one spiritual guide² to her disciples, longing to overcome that reserve and reticence that holds us back. She used many images to convey the sense of surrender, of being responsive and pliable: let your soul be soft and supple as a glove, she said one day; be like a ball of warm bees-wax in God’s hand to be moulded as he pleases; let yourself be fashioned like a piece of cloth that is cut out to make a garment — and then the one I like most — allow yourself to be folded as you would fold a handkerchief! Perhaps that would suit us best: folded and put away, yet with the possibility of being put to use.

There can be nothing complacent in our service of God. The Spirit comforts — reassuring us that if we allow ourselves to be moulded by God he will not abuse the trust we place in him, he will not subdue our freedom and subjugate us. It is a risk, isn’t it? — he is so much stronger, so demanding, he who spared not even his only Son but gave him up to death. You are more than sparrows, says Jesus, but the risk is great. It is the risk involved in loving, in responding to love. But we know already, for we say it in the prayer, that our hearts are already open to God, our desires are known, we have no secrets from him. No point hiding then; nowhere to hide and nothing to hide.

But think of the wax. We must be like it. First it must be warmed. This is a gradual process. Too little heat and it is not pliable; too much and it may melt away. God does not warm us with his Spirit unless we will it; unless we give our assent, unless we submit to Christ as Lord. If we pray in earnest “Come, Holy Spirit, and fill our hearts with thy love”, then it is a sufficient invitation. We are warmed. Initially we might enjoy it — even Anglicans take joy in believing, can be uplifted, can be euphoric, can know spiritual ecstasy. Of course, at this stage we are only talking of a little warmth, a beginning of warming. But if we don’t allow it to continue, if we give no attention to it, if we fear it and draw back, nothing more will happen. We are not plastic, not pliable, not malleable in God’s hands. A little warmth, like a day’s sunshine; nothing more.

But suppose we allow that warmth to grow, suppose our prayer to God is for more heat, suppose we pray with great vigour, greater enthusiasm, and suppose God, to whom all desires are known, sees and understands that this is real, that we are in earnest, that we really, truly, passionately desire to be shaped by and for God — even though we may be afraid of what this submission, this surrender involves — suppose this is what we do, then we shall become what we are not yet but can be by the grace

² St Jane Frances de Chantal (1572-1641)

of God. What we thought hidden is revealed. What we thought lost is found. The doors we thought were closed are opened. The opportunities we thought lost are re-presented. We are renewed. We are recreated — for nothing is impossible to God. And we have a vision of a new and different future, and strength for the tasks ahead, and hope in God, and an inner certainty of future joy.

But the moulding is not painless, the future not ours to determine; our being is shaped by God that his will, not ours, might be fulfilled. We have submitted to God and the Spirit makes that submission possible, though our proud, foolish hearts, committed to their own devices and desires, would rather we were content with the cold, with spiritual torpor, standing ready with the fire extinguisher to snuff out the flames of the Holy Spirit of God. But as we pray week by week “purify our hearts by the power of thy Holy Spirit” so we might just be able in that power to pray in earnest for the divine fire to warm our souls and make us pliable beneath the loving touch of God, who will not abuse the trust we place in him. [Pentecost at the Eucharist]

Judgement and Justice

Jesus warns us about judging. “Judge not, and you will not be judged,” he says, “Condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven.” When asked to judge, Jesus avoids it. A man asks him to tell his brother to divide his inheritance with him. He refuses, saying “Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?” Asked about paying taxes to Caesar, he turns the question back on those who asked it, pointing to the head on the coin used for payment, and when the woman taken in adultery is brought to him, he also will not give a judgement for or against the Law of Moses, saying to those who brought her to him “Let the one without sin throw the first stone.” Even when Martha wants him to tell Mary to help with domestic chores, he will not.

But he asks those who listen to his teaching: “Why do you not judge for yourselves what is right?” It’s an interesting question. Why do you need someone else to decide? Jesus has no time, it seems, for law, lawyers, commentaries on law, commentaries on commentaries, no time also for judges and magistrates. His advice is simple — sort it out before you get to the court, before you appear before the judge. And oddly, once we grasp that, we understand his own mocking trial, his appearance before the Sanhedrin and before Pilate. He had no confidence in human justice for, seeing the heart, he knew that these men were not motivated by the justice of God but by regard for their own power and position. Only Pilate, who was ultimately powerless, saw through to their motives, greeting their cries of condemnation with the question “Why, what evil has he done?”

So, Jesus says to his disciples, “Why do you not judge for yourselves what is right?” And he doesn’t mean read up the laws for yourselves, make your own decisions. He means something that is much simpler. He has provided the basic material for judgement: love God, love your neighbour, love one another, love your enemy, pray for those who persecute you, forgive willingly, not counting how many times, give to the poor, but don’t make a fuss about it, lend, expecting nothing in return, be merciful, even as your Father is merciful, judge not and condemn not. The principles are very simple and they can be applied in any situation. It is a freedom that we have. It is our God-given dignity. But how often is it that we make just one decision, that of letting

someone else tell us what to do, because it is easier than being free and responsible. But Jesus says, in effect, “You apply them. Do not wait for someone else to do it for you. You are capable of judging what is right, and then of doing it.” And that is a truly wonderful thing. [20 July 2008 Evensong]

Law

Law is a burden, a great and terrible burden, and it has a tremendous capacity for growth. Laws beget laws. [6 July 2008]

No wonder then that the Lord Jesus Christ, God with us and God for us, says come to me all you that are weary and carrying heaven burdens, and I will give you rest. The biggest burden is the Law and the interpretation attached to it. It makes people weary; so much to remember, so much to do. Jesus teaches love, mercy and true justice, and one cannot help but wonder how exactly some Christians have turned this teaching into something even more oppressive than Jewish law. I am not advocating some form of moral anarchy. Quite the contrary. I am suggesting that we accept the yoke of Jesus, and learn from him, accepting that his yoke is easy and his burden light. [6 July 2008]

Love

Everything we are saying and doing is about love. It is not about differentiating who can be loved from who can't be. It is not about saying “God will only love you if you do this and this”. Come to me, says Jesus, **all** you that are weary and carry heavy burdens. Here it is, the key word, in Greek πάντες, all, the root word of pantechicon — a wonderful large van into which you pile everything, and sort it out later. And SBG is a pantechicon sort of Church. All aboard! [6 July 2008]

“Why have you grown that appalling beard?” Lord Henry Cecil asked his cousin, who had recently become a Roman Catholic. “Jesus had a beard,” he replied. “Jesus was not a gentleman,” replied Lord Henry. Alan Lascelles³ and others like him clearly thought that the best thing about Christianity was that it taught you to be an English gentleman. Paul set out the nature of good manners, and Jesus showed that if a member of the club offended you, you had a quiet chat with him, and if he wouldn't listen, you went to see the club secretary and a couple of members went and had a serious chat with him over a drink in the bar; if he still wouldn't listen, then he was ostracised, even expelled. But that is not what Jesus said. “Let the one who refuses to listen be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector” requires the incredulous response “But, Lord, you constantly eat with tax collectors, and you have healed the children and servants of a whole load of Gentiles!” Quite right. This text is not what it seems. Jesus' use of hyperbole, his deliberate exaggeration in this text goes beyond what the disciples can comprehend and what we can comprehend: it points to a whole new world, a radically different mindset, in which we are not concerned for our greatness but with service of others, where we take other people seriously, listen to them, and

³ Alan “Tommy” Lascelles was Private Secretary to King George VI. After an Easter sermon by the Dean of Windsor, which he thought too insistent about dogma, he wrote in his diary: “Anyhow, I don't like being told what I ought to believe by any other man. I am always ready to be told how I ought to *behave*; but a man's faith is his own.”

dare to trust that they belong in God's love as much as we do. And we can only do that because Jesus Christ showed us the real meaning of love in his sacrificial death and provided us with a sure and certain hope through his resurrection from the dead. [7 September 2008]

Let me conclude with a personal word. I believe that our ministry here, mine and that of my fellow clergy, and, indeed, of all us concerns the things we have heard and talked about this morning. Love of God, love of neighbour, and that invitation for all to come to Christ. The working out of that love — how we are enabled to love God, how we extend love to other people — depends on the people involved and the way in which they exercise both freedom and responsibility. The scribe of the kingdom of God brings forth from the treasure things old and new, things available to each person according to need. Some people, most people, need to be loved into the Kingdom of God. Some need more than others to understand the way in which sin of certain kinds can separate us from God and neighbour; others of us need to understand that ways of thinking and acting that are not in themselves sinful can also be barriers to divine and human love. We don't go in for "one size fits all" but we seek unity in diversity, unity in the essentials of faith, diversity of persons. We seek also for opportunities for people to become what God would have them be, remembering that grace does not destroy but perfects our human nature.

While we pursue such a course — as we believe, in faithfulness to God — you can be sure that some will attempt to ensnare, entangle, entrap us in our words and though they abuse us, and say we are not Christian, not faithful to Scripture, ignorant of catholic teaching, encouragers of sin and perversity, we, priests and people, must hold firm to what we believe, love God, love our neighbours — yes, and love our enemy, praying for those who persecute us; no other way will do. [26 October Eucharist]

Mozart

I received a gift the other day, a dozen CDs of Mozart's sacred music — a really amazing treasure trove. Among the helpful notes in the little booklet are some by Fr Philipp Harnoncourt, brother of Nikolaus Harnoncourt, who directs the Concentus Musicus of Vienna. He finds of particular interest the way in which Mozart treats texts, such as the Kyrie, that always remain the same, how he engages with them, reinterpreting them in highly individual ways. Sometimes, says Harnoncourt, it is the almighty Lord to whom tribute is due who takes centre stage — the stress is on Kyrie. At other times it is the call for mercy, the *eleison*, that is stressed as a call that may be uttered confidently, as the leper calling for healing, or entreatingly, like the centurion and the Canaanite woman, or even defiantly and arrogantly as when the disciples demand to be saved. Harnoncourt finds here Mozart's own experience of God as both very close and yet completely hidden, and our own experience may be of something very similar.

Whatever it is, whatever our need, this cry of "Lord have mercy" is not a mere formality. It emerges from our total dependence on God. It reflects and expresses our need for him. It points to Christ as our saviour and our judge. It reminds us that we do not enter the kingdom of heaven because of our own works but because we are justified by faith and redeemed by the saving blood of Christ our Lord. Lord, have mercy. [June 1, Eucharist.]

Old Age

Karl Rahner⁴, Jesuit theologian and the mentor of my theological youth, observed in his final writings, at nearly eighty years of age, that in traditional theology ageing and old age were not subjects that had been explicitly treated in any detail. Scripture, he says, though it says many great and wonderful things on the subject, “assuredly does not contain an explicit and consistently structured theology of old age”. And it is not exactly clear how the straightforward human experience of ageing can be described in any way as explicitly Christian — a Christian old age rather than old age in general. It is a gap — not one that I can fill this evening — but one that needs filling if human life is not going to be as short or shorter than the psalmist expects and if, to use just one example, “till death us do part” takes an awfully long time.

There is hope, for the Psalmist speaks of the righteous flourishing like a palm tree, bringing forth fruit in old age, ever full of sap and green, and we might want to pray that these words will apply to us, but they do not, and we must at some time address the very real questions caused by increased longevity, ill-health and bodily failure, and the need to maintain faith into old age and even unto death. [29 June 2008 Evensong]

Old Testament

When Sister Aemiliana Löhr, a Benedictine nun and commentator on the Easter liturgy, said that we read the Old Testament by the light of the Paschal Candle, she was absolutely right. She was thinking of the prophecies in the Easter Vigil, read here at the lectern in front of which the great candle burns. Christ risen from the dead sheds a new light on these writings. We do not read the Old Testament as Jews but as Christians, and some parts of it will be more significant for us, expanding our understanding of Jesus as the promised Messiah, the new Adam and the new Moses, the Son of Man and the Son of God. [Third Sunday of Easter at the Eucharist]

Prior Rahere our Founder

Vitalis⁵ is another of those interesting medieval characters and indeed there are certain parallels with Rahere. Both were Normans; Vitalis somewhat older than Rahere, born towards the middle of the 11th century of a non-noble family, and yet well educated, such that he became chaplain to Robert, count of Mortain, half-brother of William the Conqueror, and a canon of Saint-Evroul at Mortain. He abandoned this comfortable life during the last decade of the century and became a hermit. Eventually some of the hermits felt a desire to follow the Rule of St Benedict and early in the 12th century, about ten years before Rahere’s foundation, the abbey of Savigny was founded, and after it the Abbaye-Blanche at Mortain, for Vitalis’s female followers. Vitalis died on 16 September 1122 and his mortuary roll circulated in northern France and in England.

⁴ In July 2008 I made a visit to Innsbruck to visit the cenotaph of the Habsburg Emperor Maximilian I. I had completely forgotten about the important Jesuit faculty of theology in that charming Austrian town and was deeply moved to find Fr Rahner’s grave in the crypt of the Jesuitenkirche.

⁵ Blessed Vitalis, founder and abbot of the monastery of Savigny in the Norman diocese of Avranches.

One entry on the roll was made by a nun of Argenteuil. It is a poem, attributed to Heloise. It is an eloquent lament for a community that has lost its shepherd and has left only sorrow in its wake.

What use is so much and so widespread sorrow?
Sorrow here is good for nothing, rather it harms.
But although nothing useful follows from mourning,
it is human, however, to mourn the death of a father;
It is also pious to rejoice, if the force of reason
is able to annihilate the powers of sadness.

The same sentiments might have been added to Prior Rahere's own mortuary roll; they are certainly similar to the sentiments expressed in the *Book of the Foundation*. The father of the community had died, and though he died well, as a Christian and a canon, his passing was a loss. Another loss the previous year was Abelard himself; he died on 21 April 1142. Peter the Venerable, writing to Heloise in 1143, tells her of the saintliness, humility and devotion of his life at Cluny. St Germain, he said, could not have appeared more lowly, nor St Martin himself so poor. Recalling Master Peter in shabby habit just ahead of him in a procession, Abbot Peter wrote "I almost stood still in astonishment that a man who bore so great and distinguished a name could thus humble and abase himself...His reading was continuous, his prayer assiduous, his silence perpetual...His mind, his speech, his work were devoted to meditation, to teaching and to profession of what was always holy, philosophic and scholarly."

Twelfth century monks, canons and scholars are not simply interchangeable, of course, but the *Book of the Foundation* says that Rahere "left this habitation of clay and entered the home everlasting, that in his Father's house he might be crowned in his mercy and compassion. And as eternal salvation cannot come from works without charity—without which other good things profit nothing—and as charity cannot be had without the other good things by which a man is made good, we rightly have this hope concerning him, who lacked nothing of the things that belong to grace...and concerning him we trust and hope for the help, beyond our deserts, of our powerful patron."

Abelard died in circumstances described in amazingly similar words and passed over to Christ, and the words Peter the Venerable addresses to Heloise might be words of comfort to the thirteen canons left here, who felt themselves to be sheep bereft of the shepherd. "Him, God cherishes in his bosom, and keeps him there to be restored to you through his grace at the coming of the Lord, at the voice of the archangel, and the trumpet note of God descending from heaven. Remember him in the Lord..." And so we do, this year and every year. We remember Rahere our Founder, in the Lord. But we might take one more thing from Abelard, one final word of comfort, from his personal profession of faith: "But what need have I to speak of the resurrection of the body? I would pride myself on being a Christian in vain if I did not believe that I would live again." [Founder's Day at the Eucharist]

Resurrection

What shall we make of the story?⁶ It begins in uncertainty and perplexity. It begins with doing something to pass the time. It continues in darkness with no result to show for effort, effort that would normally have produced results. It passes into the light that shows, at a distance, a person not yet recognised, not yet known. It involves realism, the admission of a failed enterprise, and with it a glimmer of hope for one last try. And then so suddenly, so unexpectedly, results and revelation and amazement and knowledge, and the full light of day, and fire and fellowship and a well-known and well-loved voice saying “Come and have breakfast”. [The Butchers’ Company Sermon 2008,]

Revelation to John

The book of the Revelation of St John the Divine is the domain of madmen and mystics, and the preacher should undoubtedly heed the warning “I’d turn back if I were you”. Indeed, we hardly ever venture into it, even in the appointed readings, and when we do we edit out the difficult passages, or rather the *more* difficult and uncomfortable passages — the opening of the seals, the four horsemen of the Apocalypse, the seven trumpets, the seven angels, the seven plagues, the seven bowls of the wrath of God, the ten-horned beast, the great prostitute, and the lake of the second death burning with fire and sulphur. We tend to stick to Christ the Alpha and Omega, to the letters to the Seven Churches, to heavenly worship, the marriage supper of the Lamb, the New Jerusalem, the new heaven and the new earth. If the Revelation contains the worst possible future, it also contains the best, where death shall be no more, neither mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away. [Sunday of the Ascension at Evensong]

Revenge

This is a story from the Desert Fathers included in Helen Waddell’s book:

One day abbot Sisois received one of the brethren who had been insulted by another, and told him, with much anger and upset, the scorn that had been put upon him. He said, “I am set to revenge myself, Father.” And the old man began to entreat him to leave vengeance to God. But he said, “I shall not rest till I have stoutly avenged myself.” So the old man said, “Since thou hast made up thy mind once for all, now let us pray,” and he began to pray in these words: “O God, Thou art no longer necessary to us, that Thou needst be anxious for us: for we ourselves, as this brother hath said, are both willing and able to avenge ourselves.” But when the brother heard it, he fell at the old man’s feet seeking his pardon, and promised that he would contend no more with the man against whom he was angered. [Good Friday at the Solemn Liturgy]

Schism

I wanted to take you back in time, to Christian North Africa in the early 5th century. A heresy had grown up, creating a separate church, a schismatic church. σχίσμα means a rent, a tearing of the fabric of the Church. When Paul writing to the

⁶ John 21:3-12

Corinthians speaks of a division in the body of Christ, he uses the word σχίσμα. The Prayer Book litany says “from all false doctrine, heresy, and schism...Good Lord, deliver us.” Now, there was a schism in the North African Church. It was named after a Bishop called Donatus, and was known as the Donatist heresy. It began from a refusal to accept the ministry of Caecilian, Bishop of Carthage, on the grounds that he had been consecrated by Felix of Aptunga, who has been a *traditor* during the persecution by the Emperor Diocletian. A *traditor* was someone who, for fear of punishment, had given up a copy of the Scriptures to the authorities. So it wasn't Caecilian but Felix who consecrated him who was the problem, but Caecilian was, we might say, contaminated by Felix. Aspects of this story may start to seem familiar.

The Bishop of Rome investigated the objections and decided against the Donatists. They appealed unsuccessfully to the Council of Arles in 314 and to the Emperor in 316. Nevertheless, the schism prospered theologically. Let me explain why. The Donatists were rigorists. They claimed that as the Church was a unique source of holiness, no sinner could have a part in it. Unworthy bishops had to be excluded for the guilt of a bishop automatically rendered ineffective his prayers, including those used in baptism and ordination. To survive in its full holiness the Church, like the vine, had to be drastically pruned, or, to put it in terms of the parable that we just heard, the weeds sowed among the wheat had to be rooted out now. The Donatists saw themselves as a group that existed to preserve and protect an alternative to society around them. They felt that their identity was constantly under threat, first by persecution, then by compromise. They believed in Law. Some of their attitudes came directly from the Old Testament and like the Jews they believed in ritual purity, and believed also that such purity could be lost through contact with an unclean thing. They held that the unworthiness of the minister did indeed affect the validity of the sacraments.

They were opposed to the Catholics who did not feel that the world threatened their identity. The principal spokesman for the Catholic position came to be St Augustine of Hippo. Twice I find him preaching on this morning's Gospel. First he says, why are you so full of zeal? You see weeds among the wheat, you see evil Christians among the good, you wish to root out the evil ones. Be quiet, he says, it is not the time of harvest. The time will come, may it only find you wheat! Why do you vex yourselves? Why bear impatiently the mixture of the evil with the good? In the field they may be with you, but it will not be so in the barn.

In his second sermon he mentions Donatus by name. He is talking about unity and charity. He points to the problem involved in correcting the sins and faults of others: “Let anyone who thinks he stands, take care lest he fall.” That is the Apostle Paul; we might say “there but for the grace of God go I.” And Paul says — Augustine quotes him here — that though I speak with the tongues and angels, and have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And as an example of this he turns to the parable of weeds and wheat, and of the good seed sown everywhere. An enemy has sown the weeds. “Let them grow together,” says the householder to his slaves. Grow where? In the field, of course. What is the field? Is it Africa? No. What is it then? It is the world.

And what does Jesus say when he explains the parable? The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, the good seed are the children of the

kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one; the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the world; the reapers are the angels. Augustine asks: “Is Africa the world? Is this present time the harvest? Is Donatus the reaper?”

We become Donatists if we doubt the faithfulness and promises of God. We do it if we think we, and we alone, are the good seed and everyone who does not agree with us is no better than weeds. If we take that approach, then we must scrutinize the life and behaviour and connections of everyone. At the door the sidesman will be required to ask you questions about what you have thought and said and done in the past week. It is not sufficient that our hearts should be open to God, that we should review our own behaviour before confessing that we do not trust in our own righteousness — no, some will be called upon to judge others, and if a negative judgement is returned the person who is judged is unchurched, declared unworthy to be a part of the Body of Christ. But wait a moment, we are all unworthy, in varying degrees. If it depends on us, there will be no Church. Some of my critics write to me as “true Christians” proposing, in fairly strong language, that I should be expelled from Church and ministry; I can only reply as a very flawed and imperfect Christian, unwilling to unchurch anyone who believes in the love of God in Jesus Christ. Perhaps we do have one claim to superiority here in Smithfield: experience tells us that it is dangerous to judge others, to pronounce them unchristian, to rend the Body of Christ — it leads to the fires that consume the martyrs. We know that because it is a shameful part of our history.

Augustine felt that the Donatist ideas were inadequate because they were static. The Donatist church was always on the defensive, immobilized by anxiety to preserve its identity. One Donatist bishop said it was like Noah’s ark, well tarred inside and out; it kept within itself the good water of baptism, it kept out the defiling waters of the world. Augustine saw the Church in dynamic terms, engaging with the world, never claiming for itself any holiness other than the holiness of God.

We have to ask ourselves what it means to be, not an inward looking Church, obsessed with the purity and proper order of those within, but a Church open to the world, witnessing to the fundamental teachings of Jesus Christ. I said a fortnight ago that the key word in Jesus’ invitation to come to him was “all” — come to me all you who labour or are heavy-laden. I said the Greek word was *παντες* — all — from which we can make *pantehnicon*, a very large furniture removal lorry into which you pile everything, to be sorted out later. That same idea is found in the parable — the same idea of keeping together the pure and the impure, the good and the bad, the weeds and the wheat, and letting them be divided only at the end, at the harvest, by the one who only can judge the living and the dead.

Pray God will keep us from modern day Donatists. And from all false doctrine, heresy and schism, Good Lord, deliver us. [20 July Eucharist]

Sin

It would surprise me if, following the application of self-examination, with scripture reading, prayers, fasting and abstinence, we discovered that we are where we thought we were. Our lives tend to drift. Our good intentions are eroded. One may find in these days that debt increases, weight increases, time uncommitted and available

decreases, behaviour becomes unconsidered and life unreflective. All these things do not happen to all people — long ago in psychotherapeutic training I was taught to say “I” rather than “one” — and so I have to say that this is my experience: poorer, heavier, busier, acting, as I have said before, like a pinball, hoping that the score at the end of the day, week, month or year, is worth the hurtling about and hitting things. I didn’t mean it to be like this: hurried prayer, part finished Bible reading, unreclected celebration of the Eucharist and so on. The besetting sins of the clergy. [Lent I Eucharist]

We are urged to pray thus because we have all sinned, every one of us. St Augustine of Hippo, addressing adult candidates for baptism, assures them that even bishops sin. He is not talking about big sins, mortal sins. He says “though ye abstain from idolatry, from the consolations of astrologers, from the cures of enchanters, though ye abstain from the seductions of heretics, from the divisions of schismatics; though ye abstain from murders, from adulteries and fornications, from thefts and plunderings, from false witnessings, and all such other sins...yet still there is no want of occasions where one may sin.” He points to the sins of the eye, to the ear that is not closed against impure, flattering or seducing words, and then turns to the deadly tongue. And if the eye and ear are closed to sin, the hand and tongue restrained, yet there are thoughts. How often, he asks, do we pray with our thoughts elsewhere, as if we forgot before whom we were standing? And if all these things, these little things, be gathered together, they will overwhelm us. In an analogy that would be amusing if it were not for the seriousness of the subject, he asks what matter it is whether lead or sand overwhelm us. The lead is all one mass, the sand small grains; both can overwhelm us. [Good Friday at the Solemn Liturgy]

Symbolism

On the Feast of Dedication of the Priory Church, at Evensong and Benediction, I spoke of the way in which the elaborate rite of dedication was interpreted by Hugh of St Victor, who was an Augustinian canon in Paris and a contemporary of Prior Rahere, our Founder. He was also a contemporary of Peter Abelard.

The symbolism is complex, the theological method alien to us, with its tremendous stress on the outward sign representing inner and hidden reality. The very world and everything in it ceases to be reality and becomes just a sign of the real. Everything means something else and in a way it is an elaborate game of interpretation in which even the rules are hidden and need to be guessed at, with no way of checking the rightness of the guess.

Everything does not require an explanation. Things can just be. Nothing shows this more clearly than benediction. We could talk of eucharistic theologies and the way in which the white disk of bread is or represents Christ, we could ask about the monstrance, the candles, the vestments, the text of prayer and chant, but all that would draw us away from a simple act of adoration — the adoration offered to God in Christ by his faithful people. Interpretation, such as that made by Hugh, and beloved of most medievals, is utterly fascinating but it does not always reveal the truth — sometimes it obscures it, generating, as Abelard said of one of his teachers, more smoke than light. We will never understand all profound mysteries but S. Paul tells us that it need not concern us. Now we see through a glass darkly, but all this will

change and we will one day know fully even as we are fully known. Until then we should remember that intellectual knowledge is not a substitute for devotion.

Trinity

Every time we say the Creed we affirm our belief in one God and we continue “the Father almighty” as if only God the Father can be truly called “God”. The crucial word in the creed is “and”. It is the conjunction linking the statements of faith but it does more than perform a grammatical function; it performs a semantic function, controlling the meaning of the whole. You haven’t finished the declaration of belief in God when you have finished with God the Father — there is an “and” and it pushes us on to the recognition that we believe also in the Father’s only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Spirit. To these, because really inseparable, the early creeds unite belief in the resurrection of the body and in the one holy catholic Church. Creeds written before the disputes over the nature of Christ sometimes mentioned the Trinity directly but later creeds expanded the section devoted to the nature and person of the incarnate Son of God. In a way this has unbalanced the creed, expanding the middle section so that it is as long as the other two sections combined. Such is our focus upon Christ, however, that we have hardly noticed, and the liturgy contains many counter-balancing references to the Trinity. [Trinity Sunday at the Eucharist]

Vine

There was a garden attached to the house where we used to live, next to St Sepulchre’s on Giltspur Street. It is an overgrown wilderness now but we tended it, and there I was the vinegrower, the vinedresser. It was there that I first understood the line from the Song of Songs about the vines being in blossom and giving forth fragrance; they did, and I didn’t know that. The vine grew rapidly in summer and bore small but inedible grapes. Left to its own devices, it simply spread and spread further and further, with lovely leaves and curling tendrils, but if it was to produce anything it had to be pruned. John speaks in his Gospel of the presence of Christ as the vine. I am the vine, he says, you are the branches. The branches are not separate from the vine. Root, trunk and branches make the vine what it is. The whole Christ encompasses all parts of the vine. We are a specific part: the branches. It is the branches that bear the fruit. A branch cannot survive if it is separated. Cut off from the vine it withers. We remain part of the vine if we abide in Christ. [Sixth Sunday of Easter at the Eucharist]

Weaknesses

For the most part we know our weaknesses and are armoured at those weak points, willingly taking up the armour of light, of which the Advent collect speaks. And if we have absorbed the words of the liturgy, if we are aware of “manifold sins and wickedness” in a general sense and of following “too much the devices and desires of our own hearts” in a more specific sense, leaving undone what ought to be done, doing what ought not to be done, then perverse flesh and tarnishing sin⁷ are nothing new to us. But there may be some other area, some aspect of our lives in which we

⁷ “the fault and faintheartedness of the perverse flesh, how it tends to attract tarnishing sin.” *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

think ourselves strong, where we do not employ armour and fortification. [Fourth Sunday of Advent at the Eucharist]

Wisdom

How is wisdom to be found, given that human knowledge and wisdom are not the same thing? You may remember that I have spoken before of the anti-intellectualism of the later middle ages, the sense that the constant squabbling over the meaning of words and ideas was arid and fruitless. The approach is summed up most clearly in *The Imitation of Christ* attributed to Thomas a Kempis who quotes Aristotle saying “Every man naturally desireth to know” and continues “but what availeth knowledge without fear of God?” And he exhorts us “cease from inordinate desire of knowing”. [Incidentally, when I turned to my bookshelves to find *The Imitation of Christ*, it was in a pile waiting to be reshelved and beneath it was Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* — the struggle between the two approaches continues.] The correct approach to wisdom may be found by going back behind the schools, that later became universities, to the concept of learning, of being learned, that is found in the monastic tradition of St Benedict of Nursia, something that came to be called *sapienter indoctus*, learned ignorance. In this approach the primary purpose of life is the search for God and the primary means of achieving it *lectio divina*, a form of meditative reading — not reading for knowledge, but reading in order to shape and reshape the self according to the divine rules. [12 October 2008 Evensong]

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