

“Come and see”

Extracts from the 2009 Sermons of the Reverend Dr Martin Dudley Rector of Saint Bartholomew the Great, Smithfield in the City of London

This is the second collection of extracts from sermons that I have preached at Saint Bartholomew the Great. It is a response to the frequent requests that I get for copies of sermons. I don't give away copies of my sermons. Preaching is a work in progress. Each sermon is a snapshot, a response here and now to a combination of influences. The content of a given sermon may be unexpected. I rarely sit down knowing what I am going to say but read the biblical lections for the day, explore the meaning of words, reach for volumes of theology, and draw on my own thoughts, prayer and experience. I have not included in this collection anything drawn from my series of sermons on Christian faith and moral decision-making as I expect to re-use much of the material in a book.

Abbot Suger of Saint-Denis

The new abbey building [at Saint-Denis] was consecrated on St Barnabas' day, 11 June 1144 by nineteen bishops and archbishops. Suger had built a gothic church alongside which the still to be completed St Bartholomew the Great would have looked heavy and old-fashioned, though our lost nave would have been more up-to-date. Because Suger wrote about his building, we understand something of the theological structure and liturgical purpose served by the building. The main theme is familiar to us, the idea that the material leads to the immaterial, the earthly to the heavenly. The purpose of the building is transportation—that the soul of the worshipper should be lifted from this world to the Heavenly Jerusalem.

It is not quite as simple as it might seem, for Suger is not concerned merely with a moment — the moment in which sunlight, passing through richly painted glass, colouring the rising incense cloud, bathes the jewelled altar and the martyrs' shrines in iridescent light, when the beauty of the chant entrances the soul, and the beauty of vestments and vessels appears to spring from a divine-source — for such a moment passes. No, Suger understands that the need to set aside the vexations and anxieties of corporal sensuality and of the exterior senses can only be addressed by divine loving-kindness and that the building, its furnishings and ornaments, is only a worthy offering, and a means of transportation to the heavenly realm, if those who make the offering welcome the grace of God, return glory to God, and become the living stones, the lively fabric of the earthly Church. (Dedication Festival Eucharist)

Certainty of Salvation

Seripando¹ delivered a lengthy speech at the Council of Trent in November 1546. He looked at the burial office and its plea “enter not into judgment with thy servant, O

¹ Girolamo Seripando (1492-1563), Augustinian friar & General of his Order, later a Cardinal.

Lord, for in thy sight shall no man living be justified.” He explained that once justified, by grace, by faith, by the passion of Christ, by baptism, a Christian is in a permanent dynamic relationship with Christ. Christ’s redeeming work is not a one-off action, like passing an exam; rather Christ continues his concern for every believer, interceding for us with the Father. And the believer, because of this intimate union, expresses God’s love as love for and service of other people. The faithful are bound to Christ by grace and their works, though imperfect, are rewarded with eternal life.

But we must notice one thing — one thing that makes us uncomfortable — it is the lack of certainty about salvation. We find it even in the Prayer Book burial service and its fear that we might at our last hour, because of death’s pains, fall away from God — and so the cry goes up “spare us, Lord most holy, God most mighty, O holy and most merciful Saviour”. There remains some doubt, no matter how small, about the certainty of the salvation of an individual, right to the last. That seems to me to be at odds with the loving nature of God, but there is another side to it — salvation is no more imposed upon us than is damnation; we play a part by responding to the love, grace and mercy of God. The Christian conflict with the world, the flesh, and the devil, the working out of the denunciations involved in baptism, requires struggle and effort, the way is, we might say, laborious, long, chequered, and perilous, but it is aided, fostered and eased by systematic precepts and counsels that represent accumulated wisdom and experience, and Christian doctrine is clear that human beings—even in the face of the Almighty Creator—carry, to some extent, their own fate in their own hands, carrying the responsibility given to them to work out their own salvation. And I think Seripando was right: we should grow daily richer in good works and open our mouths only, or at least primarily, to extol God’s grace and his mercy. (11 January Evensong)

Christ alone

It might sometimes be better to be deaf but able to see, to see Jesus in among the crowds, to see him touch the leper, spread ointment on the eyes of the blind man, to see his eyes as he looks at the rich young ruler, his hands as he blesses and breaks bread, or as he unrolls the scroll in the synagogue, or as he writes in the dust. We might understand him better if we set the words aside, ceased to argue over them, but watched him weep at the tomb of Lazarus, watched him as his feet were washed and anointed, saw him, really saw him hanging on the cross. Perhaps the words have become too much for us and we must either give them up, entirely, or for a period — like a Lenten discipline, giving up words — or we should just take a very few. I guess we could begin with just two, the words addressed by Jesus to Philip: “Follow me.” If we hear those, truly hear them, allow them to reach deep inside, to touch us in the secret inner parts — if that were possible, then we might find them to be like the sower’s seed; those words might just bear fruit. But if we cannot even deal with them, if the religious discourse with its competing claims has become too much for us, let us be deaf and simply look at Jesus the Christ, the incarnate Son of God, Christ in the crib, Christ on the cross, and never tire of looking. (18 January Eucharist)

There is a lesson here for us and a strong recommendation that we should seek out a place where we can be alone with Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ of God. I don’t mean that we should literally head for the desert, the wilderness — having been there, I did

not find it very conducive to prayer — for the desert place can be as easily our own room as that of the five star hotel or the place on the deserted beach. It can be anywhere that we are enabled to withdraw. And we encounter Jesus not by closing our eyes and trying to pray but by knowing him and his words, by reading the good news afresh, and perceiving the person and the spirit behind the words, and then trying to pray. (19 July Eucharist)

Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ of God, the incarnate deity, the second person of the holy and undivided Trinity, is the source, focus, heart, centre, meaning and fulfilment of our faith. We are called Christians. At baptism the candidate hears the words “Christ claims you for his own.” Nothing else will do. No teaching equals Christ’s own teaching, a teaching revealed in his words, his ministry, his life, his death and his resurrection. He surpasses the Jewish Law as he fulfils it; that Law and its precepts do not stand against his teaching on love, mercy and forgiveness. No-one is equal to him. Not Mary, not Peter, not Paul.

We proclaim Christ and him alone. Our religion is not based on faith alone or Scripture alone, but on Christ alone. This is the true drama of our Church and our religion. This is its true significance. And once we grasp that, once we know that in our hearts, everything changes, and we hear with greater confidence, with real certainty the words that follow: “If any want to be my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” And it doesn’t seem unreasonable or impossible, no matter how hard it may be if our eyes are fixed on Christ. (13 September Eucharist)

We are involved in an experiment — a way, one way, of being Christian in today’s world. There will be things that we have done that we will stop doing. There will be things that we will do that at present we have no thought of. There will be things to which we will rightly adhere, holding fast to them. This is much harder than being fundamentalist, whether a biblical fundamentalist or some form of dogmatic or ethical fundamentalist. In that sense we hold neither to an infallible book or an infallible person but to Jesus the Christ of God, the incarnation of divine love and wisdom. We try to see through the eyes of Jesus, hear the words of Jesus, speak the words of Jesus — no wonder “All for Jesus” is one of our favourite hymns. (15 November Eucharist)

Christian stupidity

The Christian religion has seemed particularly stupid and absurd since its beginning. Two millennia of existence, and some long periods of dominance, have blunted this stark fact. For Jews and for Gentiles the three basic Christian doctrines were not merely unlikely, unproven or distasteful: they were daft. These doctrines are the Incarnation, the Crucifixion and the bodily Resurrection. They seemed more absurd to sophisticated pagans than even their own discredited legends, the myths of the gods. To the educated Jew Incarnation and Crucifixion were both blasphemous and insane. That God, the monotheistic, transcendent God of the Old Testament, should take human nature upon himself, be enfleshed and live really and truly as a man — this flew in the face of all mature philosophical and religious assumptions. That this God-Man should then allow himself to be legally executed as a criminal by the properly constituted religious and political authorities, seemed even more insane.

And it was precisely because of this that early heresies either stripped Christ of his divinity or else made the Incarnation and the Crucifixion into a sort of divine charade in which the excluding divine Christ only pretended to be a man and only pretended to die on the Cross.

No wonder then that a man like Paul, a learned man, fluent in both Jewish theology and Greek philosophy, encountering this hostile intellectual atmosphere insisted that he was a fool. He had tried being clever, approaching the Greeks on their own terms, quoting their poetry, exploring their worship of an unknown God, but when he turned to Crucifixion and Resurrection they would hear him no more. He never tried again; not that approach. From then on he knew that he preached Christ crucified — a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, stressing that the foolishness of God is wiser than men.

I'm grateful for divine foolishness. So much that Jesus says and does is unreasonable, failing to conform to expected norms. He allows zeal — zeal for the house of God — to consume him, to feed this act of crazy defiance, the casting out from the temple of those who sold sheep, oxen and pigeons for sacrifice, and who changed the money of pilgrims, who profited from misplaced devotion and made a business out of the propitiatory sacrifice. Erasmus was doing something similar, targeting not the simple and superstitious but those who made money out of them. And when Jesus was asked for a sign — and it is reasonable to ask a wonder-worker for sign (perhaps more water into wine) — he refused and uttered the words that would one day be used against, about the temple being destroyed and rebuilt. And he was also unreasonable in condemning the pleasantly pious Pharisees and spending his time with women of ill-repute, collaborators with the Roman occupiers, and a group of disreputable fishermen from Galilee. He is not afraid to do the same now and to welcome those who will share in his foolishness even if others would reject them *in his name*. I'd be happy to rename the church, calling it not *Holy Wisdom*, like the patriarchal church in Constantinople, but *Holy Folly*, a place where we confess to holding three of the stupidest religious beliefs: Incarnation, Crucifixion and Resurrection. (Lent III Eucharist)

Come and see

The very first words spoken by Jesus in John are addressed to the disciples of John the Baptist; they might just as well be addressed to us. He asked “What are you seeking?” And when they answered — they didn't really know what it was they were seeking, so they made up an answer about where he lived — he relied “Come and see.” We don't know quite what it is that we are seeking but to us also Jesus says “Come and see.”

Come and see! To Nathanael he says “You will see heaven opened.” He warns Nicodemus that he cannot see the kingdom of God unless he is born anew. He says that the one who does not obey the Son of God shall not see life, but if you keep my word, he says, you will never see death. When he restores the sight of the blind man, he gets caught up, deliberately, in a conversation about the blind seeing and those who have sight being blind. “Are we also blind?” ask the Pharisees. “If you were blind, you would have no guilt,” Jesus replies, “but now that you say ‘We see,’ your guilt remains. The Jews ask for a sign that they may “see and believe” but they are denied

one. The Greeks want to see Jesus and he speaks of the glory bestowed on him. Philip is told “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father,” and later, much later, he will say to Thomas the doubter, “See my hands”, and he will look on the marks of the nails.

Come and see! It is high risk. Suppose we look but do not see? There seems to be a risk. Jesus says “For judgement I came into the world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.” The Samaritan woman, who has looked pretty hard at Jesus, sees he this is a prophet. The man at the pool of Siloam who is blind receives his sight. The Pharisees think they can see but they are blind and culpable. Philip cannot work out how seeing Jesus entails seeing the Father, but perhaps he hasn’t really seen at all. It wouldn’t surprise me. People often don’t see. I’ve wondered if it is an English or British thing. Is there some embarrassment in looking? Why don’t congregations look at the reader reading, the preacher preaching — do I have you attention now? — Why don’t they look at the Host elevated in the Eucharist or displayed in the monstrance?

I want you to look today. “*Ecce lignum cruces*” the Sub-Deacon will sing in a moment. *Behold the wood of the cross*. Look at it, see it, see the crucified redeemer who hangs upon it. Do more. We had a discussion about the veneration of the cross. How could we encourage you, the faithful, to venerate it? Are you shy, diffident, put off by the serried ranks of servers, uncertain of what to do? I thought of a handout, a short guide to veneration, a video, a dvd, and then I thought why not issue an invitation, here, now, on Good Friday. It has to be today. Tomorrow is too late. This afternoon is too late. I’ll tell you why I want you to do it. I want you to look on the cross of Jesus Christ. I want you to see — yes, see — him lifted up, to draw all human kind to himself, lifted up like the bronze serpent in the wilderness — Numbers 21:8 And the Lord said to Moses “Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.” John 3:14 “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

Is there something wrong there? Has a word been miswritten? Numbers speaks of looking at the fiery serpent, of seeing it and living. Jesus speaks of being lifted up like serpent but does not refer to seeing but to believing. Perhaps it is the reverse of “seeing is believing”, perhaps the axiom here is “believing is seeing” — if we believe in the Son of Man, then we see him as he really is, and if we see him, we see the Father too.

But central to our sacramental Christianity is the sign that is seen, the outward and visible sign that facilitates our grace-laden encounter with what is inward and invisible. Faith befriends our outward sense, making the inner vision clear. Yet Christian faith and religion are not merely inward; they have this outward dimension, and if we do not see the outward signs, because we are not looking, how can we be aware of the inner reality? “When I survey the wondrous cross,” says the hymn; we sing and do not look. (Good Friday at the Solemn Liturgy)

Coming to Church

Did you come here today ready to talk to God? It's slightly odd if you didn't. After all if you made an appointment to see your GP or your solicitor or your bank manager (if you are lucky enough to have one), you'd have something to say, so why come here to God's House with nothing at all to say? Nothing to confess, nothing to ask, nothing you need, no "Yes, Lord, but...." God might say "What are you doing here? Why are you wasting my time? Come back when you are ready — ready to talk to me *and* to listen to what I have to say." (6 September Eucharist)

Doubt

Doubt gets a bad name in the New Testament. Matthew is courageous enough to admit that even at the ascension of Christ "some doubted", but James thinks that the doubter is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind; the doubter is double-minded, unstable in all his ways. In a way one who doubts is double-minded. "I hate the double-minded" says the Psalmist. The Greek root of "doubt" is, in fact, *δύο*, two. The same is true of the Latin *dubitare*, with the root *due*, two, as also in *duellum*, a struggle, a duel. Doubt, genuine doubt, agonising doubt, the doubt of Pascal, not doubt as method, the doubt of Descartes, supposes conflict: two or more views or positions, teachings or explanations, in conflict. "A faith that does not doubt," said the Spanish thinker Unamuno, "is a dead faith." (Low Sunday Eucharist)

There is nothing wrong with genuine doubt if that doubting gives rise to genuine questioning, even to an authentic struggle with two or more positions or possibilities. Faith cannot rest on the negation of the power of reason, of you believing what I tell you simply because I have told it to you. You might want to accept something on my authority, as a priest, as a student of theology, as a scholar who applies appropriate methods to the critical study of the primary documents of the Christian faith. You might want to accept it because it is reasonable and coherent; it creates a coherent body of doctrine. But remember that our faith, our belief, is not primarily in a set of propositions but in a person, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth and of him we hold that he shows us God in a definitive way, that he was crucified, dead and buried, and that he rose again from the dead, leaving the tomb empty. We might well struggle with that, as did the women, the Apostles, and especially Thomas. It might well seem impossible to us. We might find no satisfactory evidence or explanation, and then we have to make a great step, a step of faith, that we might not be incredulous but believing. (Low Sunday Eucharist)

Estrangement

The state of human existence is the state of estrangement — an absolutely fundamental estrangement from the very ground of our being as well as estrangement from others and from ourselves. Now I would want to argue...that this "ground of being" is simply what we name as God. The word "estrangement" cannot replace the biblical word "sin" but it indicates rather well that sense we have of things not being right, for we are out of the divine centre of existence and centred instead on ourselves and our world, focussed, to use traditional language, on the earthly rather than the heavenly.

If we accept this fundamental estrangement of humankind from God then we may want to ask about the adequacy of Adam-language in describing it. Can “For as in Adam all die” be rendered in a less mythological way without losing the impact? To say “because we are human we all die” is clearly not sufficient, for “dying” in Paul’s terms is a punishment, a consequence of sin, the result and symptom of our estrangement. The story of Adam expresses how that came to be; it tells also of the consequences and Paul uses it to show us how Jesus reverses the estrangement, overcomes sin, and brings us life rather than death.

And we cannot simply abandon the doctrine of original sin. We are aware of it in a fundamental dislocation. It does not simply belong to the past, superseded by baptism and justification. It has abiding significance. It indicates that salvation and grace are unmerited, that they take their origin from God and also — and here the Adam-Christ link is essential — grace and salvation have an objective historical dependence on Christ. So our state of estrangement is not some human disorder that we can cure; it can only be remedied by divine action and for reasons that will be explored in Holy Week it depends on the passion and death of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ of God. His saving death and resurrection do not simply usher in a new age. Original sin speaks to us of the situation of death, frustrated desire, legalism and futility which estrangement creates, together with the empirical inseparability of good and evil, its admixture in all things. Estrangement belongs to the beginning and it continues as long as human history continues. In Christ we can plan for and work for a different world, a different future, a concrete manifestation of divine grace in individuals and in society, but the doctrine of original sin is a warning that, though this task undertaken in hope is essential, it cannot be completed in this world or in the course of history.² (Passion Sunday Evensong)

God

Jesus ben Sirach sees that man does not fulfil this purpose, does not discharge this task. All men, he says, are dust and ashes; all things cannot be in man for he is not immortal. God is immortal and infinite, the one who lives for ever and created the universe; he alone is righteous and none can search out his mighty deeds. His power is majestic. His mercies cannot be fully recounted. He can be neither diminished nor increased by anything we do, nor can his wonders be traced. The writer has no problem with the majesty of God; indeed he offers us a helpful reminder than God is infinite, omnipotent, and incomprehensible. In our words about God we are like babbling infants, struggling to express meaning. God is not a being like other beings, similar but greater; the divinity is of a different nature, not a being but the source of all being. (19 July Evensong)

Good Wine

Tribus miraculis declares the historic liturgy of the Church; three wonders, three miracles, mark this holy day. The second of them is that related in John chapter 2, the wine made from water at the wedding feast at Cana. There is more to this than the showing of Christ’s glory, more than just a miracle, albeit the first miracle, after which the disciples believe in him. Today, says another liturgical text, the Church

² See Karl Rahner, *Original Sin*, in SM 4:333

hath been joined to her heavenly Spouse, for Christ hath washed away her sins in the Jordan; the Magi hasten with gifts to the royal nuptials, and the guests are gladdened with wine made from water.

This may be a surprising interpretation, but it is a very ancient one. The earth's peoples and their kings are invited as guests as God's marriage with humankind. As the Church is Christ's Body, so his baptism in Jordan is her washing also; he did not need cleansing but she did. Now we come to the marriage and the feast in which God shows himself as the bridegroom. God's visitation is seen as a marriage procession. In the Old Testament God took the Virgin Israel for his betrothed and loved her with a bridegroom's love, although she was faithless. Such love as this brought him at last to earth to set the Bride free from her captivity. We will come in a moment to the wine and its abundance but think of the point in the feast when the miracle occurs. The wine has run short. There has been wine and it has all been drunk. At the end, at the last, comes the best wine.

Time is one of the great Advent themes — God's right time is when humankind is ripe for saving. There is a strong sense of the accomplishment of the prophetic word, an urgent call for watchfulness, the master comes when least expected, the bridegroom is apparently delayed, but in fact he comes at the right time for he knows when it is right. The good wine is kept to the last. There have been previous glimpses of the glory of God. Wise men and poets, prophets and visionaries have drunk of the wine of divinity, but this "good wine" is something more: it is the very essence of God and it is the sign of God breaking into the world. (Epiphany Evensong)

Hope

Hope in this sense requires faith. Faith is not a substitute for knowledge and thinking, rather faith accepts that all human knowledge is fragmentary and all human thinking incomplete: we are like those who struggle with a jigsaw puzzle, having managed to put quite a few pieces together but uncertain about the big picture. We have sufficient knowledge and power of thought — without God, without belief in God — to live more or less coherently and significantly and we may, in consequence, give up bothering about the bigger picture, making do with what we've got, or else think we have it all sorted; the former path leads to an unreflective life, one that is partly lived, partly human; the latter path leads to pride, to overweening hubris.

Faith and hope require humility, the recognition that we see, as St Paul said, through a glass darkly. Faith and hope require charity in the sense of charitableness — tolerance of, sympathy for, other people — and love in every way we understand it. Hope, like faith and love, is dynamic. It is a quality of living that takes us beyond ourselves, transcending our limitations; it is discernible, spasmodically, in the complex, ceaselessly moving pattern of human behaviour. Hope is not the last resort, the only thing left in Pandora's wretched box nor is it just optimism that, no matter how bad it gets, all will be well in the end. Hope is the style of living which proclaims that all is well here and now — despite alarms, despite dangers, despite anxieties — and just now we need more than ever to live as those who have hope. (Sermon preached to the Guild of Public Relations Practitioners)

Idolatry

You may think that idols are chiefly a thing of the past, an evil no longer needing to be opposed or bothered about. We have resolved the issue. We recognise that a devotional image is not an idol. We do not hold, for example, that the figure of the Redeemer on any of the crucifixes in this church or the statue of the Risen Christ or the icon of the Theotokos and the Christ-child are idols, images that we worship. We perceive them in the manner of the sacraments; outward and visible signs. The idol has a life of its own and is treated as a god; the image points to something else, a reality beyond. Even then, however, images are to be treated with care, while we retain the traditional practices, we must be wary of abuses. There have been Christians, during the Iconoclast Controversy in the 8th and 9th centuries, for example, who took a contrary view, and Reformers and Puritans in England have also been iconoclastic.

But that is not the end of the issue and we may say that a new challenge has emerged. Islam is strongly opposed to idolatry. On one of a number of websites promoting Islam as the only true religion and opposing Christianity, a critic sets out to strike at the very heart of our faith. He defines idol-worship in wide terms as the worship of a statue or a human being or power or money or status or property — a lengthy and considerable list, and continues “as long as a Christian regards Jesus (peace be upon him) as God, he is an idol-worshipper.”

This criticism of Christianity is certainly to be found in the Koran, where Jesus is acknowledged as a prophet of God, that is, of Allah, the Arabic name for God. It is, I think, an insoluble problem. Islamic scholars claim that it is the result of corruptions and disagreements introduced by Christian priests and ministers such that Christianity is no longer a valid pure religion of God Almighty, whereas, they claim, Islam is a pure uncorrupted religion. Muslims, they say, respect God Almighty better than do Christians in their worship. As I observed on Trinity Sunday, and what better day could there be for it, the revelation of Jesus Christ as the Son of God is clearly expressed in the Gospel according to Saint Mark when Jesus is baptised in Jordan and the heavenly voice says “Thou art my Son, the Beloved” and when the unclean spirits declare “You are the Son of God” and again at the Transfiguration. To accuse Christians of idolatry or of failure to worship God as one and almighty is the result of a misunderstanding of what we have received and the faith that we hold for we confess that Jesus Christ is Lord not to diminish or insult God but precisely, as Paul teaches, “to the glory of God the Father”. Or, to express it another way, as Paul writes to the Colossians, Christ is the beloved Son of God, the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation, for in him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. (21 June Evensong)

Lent

Ash Wednesday is much more basic; it takes us back to our creation, reminding us that we are dust returning to dust. It poses a question — a question equally relevant to believers and unbelievers — if life is short, relatively short anyway, and if the day of returning to dust can come without warning, if each day could be the last day for us,

why do we waste it? Why do we pass the time rather than making something of it?
Why do we kill it rather than live it? (Ash Wednesday)

Losing sight of God

All things are lawful to me, says Paul, but not all things are helpful. All things are lawful, but not all things build up. We don't have to be talking sin here but only those patterns of behaviour that squeeze out the time that might be used in pursuing the path of discipleship. God slips down the priority list — down and down — and we barely notice. Even the outward manifestation of faith, the habitual and frequent participation in the worship of the Christian community, is lost, sacrificed to other less important things: it becomes occasional, and with it is lost prayer and attention to Scripture, because we no longer hear it read, and the awareness of the need daily to continue the struggle. (Ash Wednesday)

Marriage

Knowing and willing are the two great components of conscious life. Aquinas describes *will* as the source of a great variety of acts: love, desire, choice, joy, and so on. Now Aquinas loves to analyse, to break down into smaller and smaller divisions in order to illuminate the whole and he determines that there are six steps in willing. First, with regard to the end in view, there is a *mere wish*. St Thomas stresses that we can only truly will what is good, as we can only hope for what is good. This mere wish may become an *intention*, an active desire for the good in question. Then the will is concerned, in two steps, with the means by which the end may be achieved: it *considers* the means and *chooses* one. The last steps concern the *execution* of the act, in which the will engages other necessary faculties, and then — I like this — the will experiences *enjoyment*. The word for this enjoyment is *fruitio*, and gives rise to a misunderstanding when we talk of something being brought “to fruition”. For *fruition* is the action of enjoying, and does not refer to some project being fruitful but to us being found in the pleasurable possession of what we desired.

Now marriage might well be defined as “the pleasurable possession of what we desired” and we certainly wish bride and groom, Juliet and Richard, a lengthy, indeed a lifelong, *fruition*, and it might be interesting to discover whether they, to some extent followed the five steps leading to it. But we must also take a wider view. The Book of Common Prayer, written in English in 1549, sets out the reasons why it was thought that God instituted marriage “in the time of man's innocency”. It was ordained first for procreation, secondly for the control of the instincts, and thirdly, and most importantly, “for the mutual society, help, and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity.” The good that is desired is first the good of the other and then our own good within this mutual possession, this belonging with and to the other. And such desire cannot be subject to the passions, to the heats of our desires, to quote the American poet Whittier, but must be something voluntary, something willed; hence the question “Will you?” The desire for the good of the other, the beloved, is the highest desire in the relationship between men and women which we call marriage. It puts the other person before us, it is a selfless love, but the essence of marriage is that it is a reciprocal and reciprocated love. (At a wedding on 14 February)

Motherhood of God

God loves us not because of anything that we have done ourselves. He loves us even when we are estranged from him. He beholds us as orphans. He sees our poverty. He helps us in need, consoles us in despair, encourages us when we faint-hearted, embraces us in love. We do not have a mandate that allows us to call God “mother” or “parent” for the divine nature is revealed as that of Father, Son, and Spirit, but the best characteristics of motherhood belong also to God. Of the widow Berta Heyen, Erasmus says, “Why shouldn’t I have loved her as I would a mother, since she cherished me like a son?” And we too are nourished by God as sons and daughters, receiving, as Paul, will say, spiritual milk for our nourishment. But let us also take up Erasmus’s earlier point about the mother feeding her baby; he refers not just to milk but to the fragrance of the mother’s body. He presents us with a picture of the most intimate love between mother and child in which the child receives a fragrance from the mother. And if that is so, how much stronger must be the fragrance we receive from intimacy with God? (Lent IV Eucharist)

My cup overflows

We loved Carol Richardson. She was a loveable person. Our memorial hymn, to be sung at the end of this Requiem expresses our feelings: when the shadow of death fell upon her, we sorrowed, but now we rejoice that she rests in the Lord. She lived for many years, and especially for the last two years, in the shadow of death. She passed through its valley and she did not fear. She bore it with fortitude, with courage, with a resignation to the divine will which was never despair. She was surrounded by goodness and mercy. She always said that she had the best possible medical and nursing care, the best possible support, the best family, the best friends. If you asked her, she would have said with the psalmist “My cup overflows”. (At the Funeral of Carol Richardson)

Riches

Jesus is not opposed to wealth, nor Paul, nor the Wisdom writers, and certainly not Thomas Cranmer, but they all knew that it makes it harder to enter the kingdom of heaven. Where your treasure is, Jesus taught, there will your heart be also. The teaching is not comfortable or reassuring but it is necessary. The Church has an ambivalent attitude to wealth. Every day I hear the money being counted in the office next to mine. Every week I receive the report of the amount taken at the door, the amount put in the plate, the amount of tax reclaimed. On an occasion like this I am constrained to preach a reasonable and reasonably entertaining sermon because I want you to put money in the gift aid envelope and to complete your details — just a reminder in case you haven’t done it. But I cannot cleverly remove the words of Jesus, who fears that our love of the earthly will stand in the way of the heavenly and prevent our entry into the kingdom. That is not the inevitable consequence — he is also clear about that — but it is harder. Ultimately it depends on God, with whom all things are possible and upon our willingness to ponder carefully the words of Jesus: “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, and follow me.” (Sermon to the Worshipful Company of Tax Advisers)

Scripture

The divine self-revelation is clearly not synonymous with the written text, for the experience precedes reflection and recording, telling and writing. God is revealed to Moses, for example, in the burning bush and on the mount of God and not in any written text. Christ's divine nature is revealed in numerous ways, and not least in his transfiguration, and the disciples believe in him and record his teaching, his miracles, and the events surrounding his passion, death and resurrection, in the books we call Gospels, that we too might believe by their testimony. They are inspired to write. Luke wanted us to know the truth and John tells us explicitly that "Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name." (5 July 2009 Evensong)

We do not profess faith in the Holy Scriptures; they have no place in the Creed. Archbishop Cranmer understood the Scriptures when he wrote, in the old collect for the Second Sunday in Advent:

Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning; Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience, and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace, and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ.

That is the Anglican position. Christ is the revelation of God. Scripture is written for our learning. We learn in order that we may know eternal life in Jesus Christ, who is the very Word of God. (5 July 2009 Evensong)

Sharing the Peace

And the point about sharing the peace — his peace, his gift to us — is that the Eucharist is the fullest expression of this interaction, of the horizontal level that links us in Christ's love to other people, and the vertical level that links us to God. We do not come to the altar of God trusting in our own righteousness but knowing our unworthiness, our failure to love both God and neighbour with our whole hearts. We come to God for forgiveness and renewal, to be confirmed in all goodness and to be preserved in life eternal. And we do not come alone. We come as the community of faith, we come as God's people, to share in the supper of the Lord, where Christ renews his promise to his disciples and makes us part of it. (8 February Eucharist)

The Vine

This idea of belonging to something greater than ourselves, a something that gives us the meaning that we lack, this is a spiritual idea, one we need to grasp. We don't have to look elsewhere for spiritual idea, to yoga, to Buddhism, to the Sufi mystics of Islam. We have our own spiritual inheritance. It may not be what we want to hear; it rarely is. It challenges our self-sufficiency. I am just a branch; not the whole, not even the most important, most fruitful one. I am a sheep in need of a shepherd; a lamb needing to be rescued. I am the blind man needing to see, the deaf who cannot hear, the lame who cannot walk, the mourner needing comfort, the one so poor that I

reach out empty hands. I am the sinner in need of forgiveness. I am one that God loved so much that he gave his only Son. I am a sheep of his flock, a sinner of his redeeming, a labourer in his vineyard. I am the branch and he the Vine. He abides in me and I in him. If I know this I am ignorant no more, and I am not timid, but bold in his service, bearing fruit, ready to be pruned and to bear even more. (10 May Eucharist)

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