

Sermon on the Gospel for Passion Sunday, March 13th 2005 at St Michael's Cornhill

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“Before Abraham was, I am.” These five words seem to me one of the most powerful and chilling statements in the account of the death and passion of Christ. Jesus uses it, harking back to Exodus 3.14, when God, as I AM, speaks to Moses from the burning bush. It is the sacred name of God which the Jews never pronounced –except once a year on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. In the original Hebrew it best translates ‘I will be who I will be.’ It belongs to this our Passion Sunday, and the gospel for today.

It’s when Jesus is not the son of God but very God of very Gods, and they are the same. He declares himself. And because the New Testament has this wonderful quirky way of reaching the profoundly serious by way of the witty, even the bathetic, it is preceded by ‘What, thou art not yet fifty years old and hast thou seen Abraham?’ People can be very foolish: well, they are, they need saving, and badly. And not just ‘they’, ‘us.’ We share the same nature of those long ago people. If we hear something we would rather not hear we take up stones and throw. And then comes the answer, ‘ Before Abraham was, I am. I will be who I will be.’ And the sheer force of that takes the sneers from our faces.

‘Before Abraham was, I am.’ ‘The strength of the hills is his also, the sea is his and he made it, and his hands formed the dry land.’ And the hills and valleys bow down before Him, and should.

I spoke to a Church of England vicar the other day. She wanted me to go and talk at the local church hall, which was in danger of being closed, and I was happy to say I would. People pay for tickets and the money goes towards the Church Fund. That's fine. I'm happy to do that. I have been a Christian for only a few years: I started from scratch, never even christened as a child: my parents being intellectual humanists, too ethical to commit me to something I knew nothing about. So five years back I was christened and confirmed in St Pauls by the Bishop of London and now I am a communicant. I will go and talk to any congregation believing we are all brothers and sisters in Christ, though I would rather go to a prayer book service any day, and have to work hard not to flinch at the bongo drums, the karaoke hymns and the sheer coziness of the that branch of the Anglican faith who believes that the language of every day is sufficient to bring people to God. God is not every-day. A Church service is not a group therapy. My lady vicar told me that the church service was about making people feel good and fostering togetherness and community spirit and leaving the Church feeling warm and comforted with their spirituality enhanced. I said I thought God was rather more frightening than that. Before Abraham was, I am. I will be who I will be.

In our local church they are taking down the Victorian oak boards on which the Ten Commandments are engraved because they depress people and looked gloomy, and they like a bright and cheerful church. Apparently they were seen as forbidding. Well, what else? Thou shalt not. She said her congregation – who were all over seventy she said, and she was about 40 – had come to her and asked her not to read those certain epistles in which they're told not to fornicate and commit adultery and get drunk because they weren't really likely to, were they. So she was picking the bits of the Bible she felt were

appropriate. She liked to be in charge. But it was rather a facer: hard to find a rationale. I thought fast and said but surely, those were written when people seldom lived beyond fornication age: what the congregation had to do was to consider their own inclination to cheat and betray, even though it no longer took physical form. Don't change the liturgy to suit the audience, change the audience to suit the liturgy. Isn't that the general idea? But it was easier not to try and she's busy: she really is, about her pastoral duties which she fulfills very well. All our clergy are overworked and underpaid. She said that the churches which used the old language – which she seemed to actively dislike – were emptying fast and the ones which used the new were filling up, and I said but that's because you're delivering feel-good sessions and a singsong on a Sunday: you have removed the terror and awe of God from the service

You are worshipping a false God, I wanted to say, one made in your own image. A nice, touchy- feely social worker and I suspect very female God.

I will go along in a few weeks and say a bit of this to those gathered but not too much because I don't totally have the courage. 'And whoso offend one of these little ones who believe in me... better a millstone' and so on. And one hates to be impolite; and one shouldn't be. That is also one of the lessons of the Church of England, a great desire not to offend, which is getting us in to terrible trouble.

But the dislike is interesting. It is a real dislike of the 1662 prayer book, or even of the 1928 one. Why is every version so much worse, so much less precise, so much less a call to worship, so much less an understanding of the nature of God, and certainly the nature

of language, than the preceding one? I think it is quite simple. People approach God in different ways. Some people find Him best through their aesthetic sensibilities, some do it by taking soup to the poor, some do it by being terrified of the consequences of unbelief, through the expectation of heaven or the fear of hell. Or who 'sweeps a room as for thy cause, makes that'n the action fine.' All are valid: though some, I think, are more valid than others. But those of us who approach God through our aesthetic sensibilities are under attack from those who don't, or can't. We are being squeezed out, but surely there is room for us? But no, take down the ten commandments from the walls, strip out the pews, don't say 'With this ring I thee wed,' say 'I'll always be there for you.'

Those who are tuned to the beauty and power of God and all his majestic works, who worship God through the perfection of his gifts, who hear the music in this Church, who look at its architecture, who speak the ancient liturgy and are the more convinced of His presence, are not popular. Generations who have been bought up to think that ugliness is the norm, from Walt Disney's Goofy through Cabbage Patch Dolls to the graffiti of the tower block, to the ugly cult of nastiness on our television, are simply not party to the aesthetic approach to belief— it is too elitist for our times. But times change, people learn, Jesus came down to earth to save us. Despair is also a sin. 'By his own blood he obtained redemption for us.' After the Passion comes Easter. Verily, verily' (or in the new language 'Most certainly I tell you') - 'Verily, verily, I say unto you, before Abraham was, I am. Then took they stones to cast at him, but Jesus hid himself, and went out of the temple.'

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