

Sermon: Being towards God...

The gospels are full of promises of life – eternal life, abundant life. When we hear these promises of course they simply roll over us and we go back to drudge life, hard life and life as problems. Why should this happen? It is because we put the promises of eternal life and abundant life in religious inverted commas and write them off. This has happened to all our language and thought about the Christian faith – and it is the work of the devil.

All the good, lively and exiting gospel words have become overlaid with the moth-eaten blanket of Puritanism. There is a true story about Bishop Westcott – the celebrated 19th century biblical scholar, a man who took a forensic attitude towards the study of the gospel. He was once on a railway station apparently when he was approached by a Salvation Army girl who asked him if he was saved. And he replied using two tenses of the Greek verb σωζω and asked in his scholarly way, “Do you mean “Will I be saved?” or “Am I being saved?” I hope she punched him on the jaw.

There is this shadow, this gloom, hanging over all our religious language. This is to choose the diagram rather than the picture. Someone – it might be a lovely little Sally Ann girl – asks us if we’re saved and we regard the question as if it were more than half about being damned. All those hymns “O for a closer walk with God” and “Who sweeps a room as for thy laws makes that and the action fine” – they are meant to sound ecstatic, but they only sound bilious and dreary. Because they’ve got puritanical speech marks round them.

The disease goes deep. For instance, we’re made to imagine that “medieval” means “miserable” But the medieval days were filled with processions and festivals and holy picnics, pilgrimages, church ales, dauncing signifying matrimonie. The modern world thinks of the middle ages only as a time of plague, pestilence and famine, mud, sin and damnation. This misperception is the unfortunate result of our recent inheritance – the Protestant Reformation, the Puritan heresy and the Enlightenment discarnation. The Middle Ages were all about being. Modernity is all about thinking. And, since Calvin and Descartes, our lives – even our cakes and ale – have been *sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought*.

We must give up thinking about God, arguing about God and – most ridiculous of all – trying to prove to ourselves that God exists. We must return to being towards God. If we are being towards God, then we experience life not as problems, a challenge and a struggle, but as an exaltation.

Generations of lovely Sally Ann girls have discovered this and they are waiting in all the railway stations to tell it to us. And they do tell us - in beautiful sentences about “giving your life to God” and “resting in him”, of “putting God at the centre” and being “forgetful of self and instead full of God”, And we don’t hear. We hear only the religious speech marks and we turn away embarrassed or bored.

Don’t turn away! Turn to God. Reclaim the ecstatic Christian vision. It is your birthright, your inheritance. It’s the gospel promise. Being towards God. Life as an exaltation. Life abundant. And life eternal.

What are you basically, deep down? What is it that you really are? Who is my mother Iris who died this week? I don't believe she was just someone with a parcel of prescriptive rights handed out to her by what used to be a country but is now only a clapped out bureaucracy. I don't believe she was just an old lady who paid her dues and got by as best she could, who put her hand in her purse once a year when the kids knocked on the door at Halloween and turned out every four years to the great confidence trick of the ballot box. I believe she was – *is* – a member of Christ, the child of God and an inheritor of the Kingdom of Heaven. I know that you are that as well. And I want to ask you to behave as if you are...

A member of Christ. Think of it – not just a member of the City Livery Club or the Italian night class. A member of Christ. That is Christ's right arm. A member who does Christ's work. But above all a member means you are a part of Christ – a living part. That you will work as he worked and suffer as he suffered.

The child of God. What an origin! You were born of God. Your being comes from him. *The child of God.* And you remember what he said about the little children – *of such is the Kingdom of God, and whosoever will not receive the Kingdom as a little child shall in no wise enter therein.* You are a child of God. Rejoice in being a child of God. You cannot live without him. And he will always take care of you.

An inheritor of the Kingdom of heaven. The Kingdom of heaven is your right. As a member of Christ and a child of God, it is your inheritance. This is what it means. You are dignified with the gift of moral agency and joined everlastingly to the Blessed and Glorious Trinity.

Now don't put any of these wonderful promises into religious quotation marks. Do not enclose them in the *Schmaltz* of piety or saturate them in sentimental hymns – all diminished chords and Uriah Heep. *A member of Christ. The child of God. An inheritor of the Kingdom of heaven.* These are not figures of speech. They are not metaphors to help us understand *something spiritual.* These words mean exactly what they say.

And so we return to answer our question. What are you deep down? What are you *really*? You *are* only in so far as you have your being in God. It is a question of what is most serious with you. What do you really take most seriously? What, as they say, is the bottom line with you? It can be anything. Your job. How you like to describe yourself to others. How you would like others to respect you. It can be your group of friends, your club, your family, your mortgage or the Thursday coffee morning.

But if you do as the Salvation Army girl invited you – if you do as Christ said, *Follow me* – if you turn towards Christ, if you direct your being towards God, if you take these promises at face value, if you know like an embrace that here you have the whole truth and the one reality, then you will not fear time and death. The sordid daily anxieties which seem significant, but are in truth nothing, will be swallowed up in the being of God.

You are not invited merely to give intellectual assent or considered opinion. It's not philosophy or argument or probability. And it is not a niche, a cosy, respectable

religious hobby. It is certainty. All you have to do is to turn towards God. To accept this relationship of love as the realest, most basic thing, deep down in your life.

As the little Salvation Army girl would say, it is *blessed assurance*. God is regarding you as a creation of his, as his child as part of Christ's body.

Turn to him. He is come that ye might have life and have life more abundantly. This is how to live your life as an exultation and an exaltation. This is what religion is. This is the salve for the world's ills. Take yourself and be towards God. *For I am come that ye might have life, and have it more abundantly.*