

## Sermon, Soul-making...

This is the last sermon I shall preach to you until Christmas Day. I'll just give it time for the cheering to die down... So I thought I might risk telling you a couple of shamelessly politically-incorrect moral tales in the hope that by the time I get into this pulpit again you'll have forgotten them. When I was a country parson I was friends with a retired judge – Sir Dermot McKee who regarded it as his vocation in life to get the Vicar absolutely sozzled as often as possible. He also had a parrot with the combined swearing power of John McEnroe and Wayne Rooney.

Dermot was in his eighties and lived on gin and water biscuits. He told me tales of his court in Leeds:

*I used to let the girls off lightly. The harlots, you know. I had Alice before me for the umpteenth time but I sent her off with a caution. Then I saw her in the middle of Leeds – in Call Lane of all places. Naturally I raised my hat stepped into the gutter and bid her a hearty Good morning. She flatly ignored me. Next time she was up in front of me, I let her off again but as she was leaving I said, "Why didn't you speak to me in the street the other week?"*

*She said, "Well, Sir, you had a lady with you – and for all I know she might have been your wife".*

Dermot loved to strike down the egos of the pompous young barristers. He said:

*I had this nauseating young moralising prosecutor approach the bench after a drink-driving case. He was on his high horse all right. He said, "D'you realise Sir that 30% of all drivers involved in accidents are drunk?"*

*I said, "D'you mean to tell me 70% of the blighters are sober?"*

Despite – or perhaps even because of – the oceans of gin, Judge McKee was one of the sharpest minds I've met. He could talk seriously – though you got the impression he didn't much like to. His motto though – the one thing he was always trying to impress on anyone who would listen – was the one word *concentrate*.

He would often say, *People are so slack. They go through the day in a daze. They don't realise they're wasting their lives.*

This is the sin of sloth and it's one of the seven deadly sins because it destroys you. Sloth doesn't get talked about much because it's not sensational like murder or fascinating like kinky sex.. The monks were always warning of the dangers of sloth. But sloth isn't putting your feet up in the afternoon and watching the Test Match – or having a long nap in the bath. Don't confuse sloth with leisure – which is a good thing – or with relaxation which is wonderful and necessary.

Sloth is that dull unwillingness really to enter wholeheartedly into your everyday life. It's that half-connectedness, dolly daydream disposition in which we just drift through. It's the unwillingness, as McKee would say, to concentrate. It's putting off the tough task because it's too much of a test. I avoid starting to write the sermon

because it's difficult, and browse through old documents instead because that's easy. We go through the day being ever so righteously busy but end it feeling rather dissatisfied, tired but without a sense of achievement. Spending a lot of time on the phone is a popular way of doing this. You might say we waste our time in displacement activity

We have some spiritual help with this. Pierre de Caussade wrote a wonderful book in which he speaks of *the sacrament of the present moment*. It is the present moment which is God's gift to us. The eternal now. We should handle the present moment then with all the awe and reverence we would when handling the Sacrament of the Altar. We can't all be monks. But living the sacrament of the present moment doesn't mean thinking about religion all the time: it means attending to, giving yourself to, the task in hand. Wholeheartedly. Concentrate.

We hear some marvellous organ voluntaries at the end of this service. In order to play a great toccata and fugue by Bach, say, the organist has had to put in hours of practice. I dare say the practice is not always enjoyable. It's a strain. It's a test. It's stress. It requires him to concentrate. It can even at times be a bit like drudgery. But no practice no toccata. *Stress* is regarded as the great curse of our age. Sometimes I think we don't put ourselves under enough stress.

Sloth is the gradual leaking away of your soul. Concentration, attention, is what builds your soul. And the job of life is soul-making. Our Lord said that he is come that we might have life and have it more abundantly. And all we have to do to receive this abundance, this bounty, is to seize it. We fiddle with our shirt buttons and stare into the middle distance instead. Or we channel-hop. Some get expensive digital cameras and click them at all the treasures of western art in the Vatican museum – as if by getting the picture in the camera they will also understand in their hearts and minds.

T.S. Eliot wrote in 1922 that the condition of modern man is to be *distracted from distraction by distraction*. He should see us now! He also a little later asked the questions: *Where is the life we have lost in living? Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?* Wow! – he was a prophet, eh? And he concluded mournfully *The cycles of heaven in twenty centuries have brought us further from God and nearer to the dust*.

Sloth is the unsensational, undramatic, disconnected, drowsy reverie, automatic pilot way to hell and damnation. People ask and don't know what they ask. I mean, people ask about their immortal soul, worry about it – whether they will live after they have died. But they didn't even live what you could call life when they had the chance. They wonder if they will get to heaven. But why should they want heaven? What would they do if they got there? What do they think heaven is like – more displacement activity and inattention, only droning on forever? Is there life after death? But is there life *before* death?

Sloth, said the monks, leads to accidie. Accidie is that soul-destroying mood of feeling dissatisfied with yourself, a little anxious, rather bored, at a loose end, neither nowt nor summat, vaguely disappointed, resentful. If we don't take action against accidie, the end is depression, disintegration of the personality and despair. You don't

have to wait for death to enter hell. *Why this is hell nor am I out of it* as Chris Marlowe said

Hell? Damnation? Forget the fire and think instead of the ice, the cold, unimaginable zero of the dead soul. Midnight and white faces expressionless under the yellow street lamps by Farringdon station at midnight, waiting for the night-club to open. Or that constant cry of the inattentive, *I'm bored! It's boring!* The complaint of boredom is the sin against the Holy Ghost because it is to refuse God's invitation to engage with his world more closely.

Your soul is not a shadowy, spooky bit. Your soul is your own responsibility. You've heard of body-building? Well, then there's soul-making – and it works the same way. Attention, practice, concentrate. For the Last Judgement will simply be the day when we are allowed to behold our soul and see what we have made.