

Sermon Lent II 2006...

There is a tendency in English Christianity to treat our faith as if it were a set of high-minded precepts. As if it were a matter of etiquette and restraint – little more than good manners in fact. And sin itself not so much worse than being caught eating peas with your knife. Let me say at once, there's nothing wrong with these outlines of decency. Good manners enrich our lives together and to come across someone who knows how to behave is a pleasure. But Christianity is a lot more than good manners.

In fact Christianity is not a set of precepts at all. It would be so much easier if it were. Because then we could all content ourselves that it was enough to say *Yes Sir, No Sir, three bags full Sir* and to tip our spoon the right way for the soup course, to be upstanding when the Lord Mayor comes in. Don't misquote me please. There's nothing wrong with these things, but they're not Christianity. This preoccupation with outward show is what Jesus satirised the Pharisees about: *Ye blind guides which strain at a gnat and swallow a camel. Ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter...Ye are like unto whited sepulchres...*

Contrary to what your modern social-gospelling clergyman tells you, Jesus was very friendly with the Pharisees. There are dozens of stories in the gospels about the hot dinners he enjoyed with them. But he satirised them for being so keen on appearances and missing the main point. And what is the main point? It is that our Faith is not about appearances and precepts: it is about wholehearted commitment to a Person. And that Person is Jesus Christ.

I have told you before that I want us to use some of these Lent sermons to draw closer to this Person, to draw closer to Jesus. And if we are to come closer to him, we must know what he is like. This is the hard bit – because there is so much disinformation, false perception and downright mischief talked and written about Jesus.

I mean, along with all this good manners worship, there is the creed of the Englishman. And the creed of the Englishman is that there is no God and it is wise to pray to him from time to time. The creed of the Englishman – washing his hands before he comes out of the loo at Drapers' Hall, remembering not to call his napkin a serviette and leaving the bottom button of his waistcoat – sorry, his weskit – unfastened – the creed of the Englishman when it comes to Jesus is this: *I don't go along with all that supernatural stuff – Virgin Births and raising the dead and that – but I do believe Jesus was a great man, an inspired spiritual teacher and a fine example to us all.*

You see what I mean by disinformation? That picture of Jesus is fiction. Actually it's utter rubbish. Jesus without the supernatural stuff? That would involve doing away with nine tenths of the gospels. For in the gospels – as opposed to the fastidious cult of deference and respect for *the great teacher* – Jesus says this sort of thing: *I and the Father are one...ye shall see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of Heaven.* He prophesises his resurrection, works innumerable miracles and institutes a miraculous Sacrament of his Body and Blood. You *can* believe in Jesus the great teacher and the fine example if you like. But it has no resemblance to the Jesus given to us in the gospels. It would be like admiring Wayne Rooney for his embroidery skills. We had

better make up our minds: accept that Jesus is the eternal Son of God, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity – or else have nothing to do with him.

We need to draw closer to the real Jesus because he is our life and to be near him is all our happiness. But to get close to him, we have to clear away so many misconceptions about him. Next to the great teacher and fine example nonsense, is the view of Jesus as a sort of super-philanthropist, a kind of proto-socialist who was nasty to the rich and kind to the poor. This ignores all those lavish dinners with the hierarchy. And when his do-gooding disciples rebuked him over the costly oil with which Mary Magdalene anointed him and said *This could have been sold and the money given to the poor* – he replied *The poor you have always with you This woman hath anointed me for burial and what she hath done will be remembered forever.*

And then Jesus is misrepresented not only as a socialist but as a pacifist, a sort of peace-campaigner. How does this square then with Jesus's saying *Think not that I come to bring peace but a sword?* And how he said that because of him and the gospel, mothers would be divided from daughters and fathers at odds with their sons? And a Roman commander, a centurion, chosen as the example of faith. And another centurion praised for building a synagogue. And yet another centurion to recognise him for who he was even while he hung on the Cross: *Truly this man was the Son of God.*

You see, if Jesus were only the personification of our best ideals, if he were only human kindness writ big, he would be no use at all. It couldn't make *us* more kind. And if Jesus were just the great teacher, that would be no good either. There had been plenty of teachers and prophets sent from God: Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, right down to John the Baptist. And some would like to add Plato and Aristotle too. We didn't take any notice of the great teachers, why should one more great teacher be any different?

But Jesus came into the world to do something quite different, to do what the great teachers and prophets couldn't do. Jesus came into the world to do for us what we cannot – not even with all our exquisite manners – do for ourselves. He came to save us from our sins. To die on the Cross and to rise again for us. Believe that – or else I advise you don't waste your time on the edges of the Christian Faith or with the church at all.

We are called to acknowledge Jesus as Peter did: *Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.* Or as Thomas did when he saw where the nails had pierced his hands and feet: *My Lord and my God.* Jesus wants us to draw close to him. He wants our love. Just think about him for a minute. Does your heart not go out to a man who knew from the beginning that the whole purpose of his life was to be tortured and murdered for our sake – and we only misrepresent him?

He prophesied his own failure remember: *They have Moses and the prophets – let them hear them.*

Nay Master, but if one should return to them from the dead, they will believe.

Verily I say unto you, if they hear not Moses and the prophets neither will they be persuaded though one rose from the dead.

That is what he did for us. Will you use this Lent and Holy Week to draw closer to Our Lord who did all this for you – and who wants your love? Does not your heart go out to him as you see this young man striding about Galilee, constantly embattled, always misunderstood? Even by his closest disciples. Think of him besieged in the uncomprehending crowds who merely wanted him to do something for them. Think of him when he was alone in the wilderness or on the mountain with the consciousness of the Crucifixion drawing daily closer. *Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.*

And in the garden secretly and on the Cross on high.

If you concentrate and meditate on the Person of Jesus as he is actually given to us in the gospels, you will find that you begin to get real glimpses of him. You will find that you are truly drawing closer to him, starting to know him as he is. And with knowledge of him comes love for him – if we pray for him to send his love into our hearts.

It's not very English. It's not stiff upper lip. It's wholehearted and full of the most tender emotion. But it's true. And I can promise you that to begin to draw nearer to Jesus as he is, is to experience a certain joy: for it is the joy that comes from what is certain. And your joy no man taketh from you.