

Sermon: Epiphany I 2007

Well, I can begin the New Year in the knowledge that I discovered one thing last year, if I did nothing else. It was something I learnt in all those carol services. Most people are *once* in Royal David's City: the choir and I are there seventeen times. And so time and again I saw stout liverymen step up to read the lessons. Very instructive they were too. Take that first lesson with God and Adam and Eve in the garden. That lovely sentence, *And they heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day*. And you remember how God asks Adam *Who told thee that thou wast naked? What is this that thou hast done?*

And the stout liveryman doesn't half give God some oomph. *Who TOLD thee that thou wast naked? What is THIS that thou hast done?* From the way this is read, you can learn a lot about the personality of the reader. His God is a an amalgamation of the sadistic housemaster taking off his jacket to give you six of the best and the monster drill sergeant telling you you've got two left blinking feet. A lot of people – perhaps it's English people? – have this severe picture of God.

And it's rammed home even in the beautiful lesson from St Luke when the angel says tenderly to the shepherds, *Fear not*. But most readers sound about as tender as the sole of your boot. They pronounce *Fear not* as if what they really mean is *Be afraid – be very afraid*. It's enough to put you off God and religion for life. But God isn't like that. There is no such God. Famously, William Blake called this horribly bullying God *Nobodaddy*. Nobody's daddy who, as Blake said, *farts and belches and coughs*. And we're meant to tremble. This is the vicious caricature of God who chases Moses (played by Charlton Heston) all around Mount Sinai.

Let's go back to that lesson from *Genesis*. I think God speaks to Adam and Eve a lot more playfully than the liveryman thinks. After all, God, being God, already knows the answer to his question. I believe God spoke something like this, *Aha! Who told thee that thou wast naked? What's this you've gone and done – twerps!* How much more telling to hear God say this with affectionate knowingness. It's the beginning of the story – the long haul that leads God to Calvary.

What Adam and Eve did was the start of Original Sin. So what does Christian theology have to say about it? The great Christian theologians see Original Sin as a piece of good luck. *O felix culpa quae talem et tantum meruit habere redemptorem*, wrote St Thomas Aquinas, *O happy fault that earned us so good and great a Redeemer*. It is a daring thought: not that sin is some sort of unforeseen consequence, but that it is essential to salvation.

God did not put Adam in Eden to be some sort of robotic gardener. God gave to mankind the gift of freewill – for without freedom of the will, man could not be a moral agent. Without freewill we would not be human. And freedom of the will must involve freedom to choose the wrong thing. Adam blundered. But it was the blunder itself that proved his humanity. *To err is human and To forgive is divine*. This is how it is. This is the truth: God *could have* made creatures who would never sin. But those creatures would not be human. And the purpose of God was to have creatures with whom he could have fellowship. *The tabernacle of God is with men* – not with perfect pieces of machinery or perfectly programmed automata.

Now if we take all this in, it's nearly too much for us. For what it shows is the lengths to which God was prepared to go – from the very beginning – to have creatures whom he could love, creatures who would be capable of having friendship with him. This - we feel we have to say it with awe and hushed tones – means that when God created mankind, he willed his own death in his Son Jesus Christ. For the coming of Jesus Christ was not some sort of Plan “B” to get us out of the mess made when Plan “A” went pear-shaped. The Incarnation and the crucifixion were in the story from the beginning. When God put the first man in the Garden of Eden, he put the Second Man, Jesus Christ, in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Now let us revisit our liveryman reading those lessons at the carol service. And let us ask ourselves which is the more terrifying – the caricature God who shouts and bawls and bullies or the God who loves us unconditionally? The glory of God is simply in this: that he is all love and that he will continue to love us whatever we do.

And then the whole story of our redemption is a series of hints and clues and signs and parables by which God makes his unconditional love for us plain. Remember the story of Abraham and how he was stopped in the last moment from sacrificing his son Isaac. What is this but a foretelling of how God did not hold back from sacrificing his Son for our sakes? All the Bible and sacred history is a series of massive yet tender reassurances on God's part that he will never leave us in our sins. He is *The Lord, my Shepherd* to David. He is also the *lamb led to the slaughter* in the prophecy of Isaiah. He is the faithful husband in *Hosea*. And finally in Christ he is *Emmanuel, God with us*.

So what does God want from you? He's not watching you, waiting for you to make a mistake, so he can come down on you like a ton of bricks, like the sadistic housemaster, the drill sergeant and the Nobodaddy. God wants to give you this friendship for which he made you. And this friendship is nothing other than the life of God himself. He said, *I am come that ye might have life – and have it more abundantly* In the Gospels for these Sundays after the Epiphany – the showing forth of Christ in the world -- we have signs of this life, what it's like: healing for the sick, casting out the demons of those possessed with anxiety and self-hurt, 180 gallons of good wine at Cana in Galilee.

Life after Original Sin is like the life of Marley's Ghost. We are all dragging these chains of sin and guilt and fear around with us. We feel as the psalmist feels when he says: *Why art thou so full of heaviness O my soul: and why art thou so disquieted within me?* And the answer is you needn't be. Stop it! You are not made for misery. You are not even made to go around feeling one degree under. You are to have life and have life – and more so.

All you have to do is accept the life of God. That's all. There are no techniques. Chuck away all the New Year health supplements in the newspapers telling you how to be physically and mentally detoxed. God has done all the detoxing that's necessary. The original temptation, you remember, was that Adam wanted to be as God. Silly of him, really: for all God wants is for us to be human – and remember in the Christmas Epistle to the Hebrews, God says he has exalted mankind above the angels.

The best words I read last year were written by Ruth Burrows, a Carmelite nun. She says, "Our trouble is that we dare not let go of our intense self-interest, feeling that if we do we will just dwindle into nothingness. But we should not imagine that God expects something better of us than our humanity provides, or that he is annoyed with our fumbblings and spiritual helplessness.

"God is not a great lord, taking delight in the homage of his vassals and affronted when this is withheld. God isn't interested in himself at all but only in us. Our happiness is his happiness. We are his obsession".

God is love. Just relax and believe it and have a Happy New Year!