

Sermon Trinity V Water Conservators' Sunday

A warm welcome to the Master and other members of the Water Conservators Livery Company. The Company come to St Michael's for their Annual Service. They come here too for a Carol Service with the Fuellers' Company. And that is a delightful occasion, with the Fuellers on one side in their red and gold and the Water Conservators on the other side in their blue and white. It always reminds me of the end of Mozart's *Magic Flute* when Tamino and Pamina go through fire and water together.

I was very honoured when I was invited to become Chaplain to the Company. And, in turn, I invited them to come to us each year for a Company Sunday. And this is their first. They have come bearing gifts of food and wine as well and we are all invited to enjoy these in the garden after this service.

A little while ago someone suggested that the Company ought to adopt a Patron Saint and, in true democratic fashion, they held a competition and finally settled on St Christopher. Our adoption of St Christopher was the reason for that little ceremony just now. Very appropriate. For St Christopher it was who carried people on his back across the raging stream and found one day that by so doing he had carried Christ. I will come back to that in a while but first let's think about water for a few minutes.

We worry about the price of petrol, while tens of millions throughout the world worry over where their next bucket of water is coming from. Forget the fashionable superstition of global warming, the unavailability of clean drinking water is the real daily threat to human life on earth. In this country we take it for granted – that it's literally on tap. But it's only a little over a century ago that London had no supply of uncontaminated water. Throughout the first half of the 19th century there were cholera epidemics here.

No one put these epidemics down to drinking water infected by sewage. The prevailing orthodoxy was that most diseases were caused by inhaling bad air, rotten smells, miasmas. There was a popular saying: *From inhaling the odour of beef, the butcher's wife obtains her obesity*. But there was an anaesthetist called John Snow who believed that polluted water was the usual cause of cholera, but his opinion was not accepted until after his death in 1858 – the year of a particularly severe pollution called *The Great Stink*. It was only after *The Great Stink* that the authorities were finally persuaded to allow Joseph Bazalgette to proceed with his plan for the mains draining of the whole of London.

One of that great man's descendants is Peter Bazalgette, responsible for the promotion of the nuts and sluts TV show *Big Brother*, which has prompted some to say the original Bazalgette took the shit out of our lives while Peter is busy putting it back.

The project of water purification in which Snow and Bazalgette were pioneers is continued today by the engineers in the Water Conservators Company. And the important thing to notice about this is that it is an example of charity. Of course the livery companies give money to charity, but that is only part of the story. For charitable works are not something left over when you've finished your daily labour:

charity *is* your work, what you apply yourself to thoroughly. And this effort of application costs you.

Think what it must have cost those pioneers Snow and Bazalgette as they faced frustration and rejection. Their refusal to be discouraged is the prime example of grace in action. They were motivated by the burning desire to help their fellow citizens. This concern for the good of your neighbour – at whatever cost to yourself – is the spiritual meaning of charity. As Our Lord said, *Inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these my little ones, ye have done it unto me.*

You see how this fits precisely with the legend of our St Christopher. His daily labour of bearing people across the torrent, ended with the realisation that in doing so he was carrying Christ. The legend of St Christopher is not an idle tale: it is a profound parable of the mystery of grace and charity. Charity is not something provoked in you by some social-gospelling preacher which results in your rushing off to perform a futile gesture in the East End. Charity is not, as Charles Dickens described it: *cold*.

It is the opposite of coldness. St Paul urges us to have *fervent charity*. Charity is something warm, even hot. It is that warmth of intention, requiring perseverance, that enables you to stick to the task in hand against all temptations and discouragements. Charity is purity of motive. That is purity of heart. Purity of heart is nothing sentimental and soppy. Purity of heart is tough persistence.

As Kierkegaard told us, *Purity of heart is to will one thing*. And that is why charity is the greatest spiritual gift. *And the greatest of these is charity*: because it is self-giving. To quote Kierkegaard again on this great subject: *Most of us are objective towards others and subjective towards ourselves: the task is to become objective towards ourselves and subjective towards others*. That reversal of the usual order of our preferences is what charity *is*.

Think of something practical then when you think of the mystery of charity. Think of putting in a drainage system or digging an irrigation ditch. Oh yes, think of such mundane things and you have the climax of one of the greatest long poems in European literature: Goethe's *Faust*. You remember the story. Faust sought secret knowledge and power through spells and enchantments, for he thought that knowledge and power would bring him happiness.

But even after a long life and devotion to his spells and occult philosophy, he found no happiness. As an old man – Goethe calls him *Greybeard* – he is moved to help some poor villagers by digging a ditch. Suddenly in this routine task he blurts out *Steht, du bist so schon! Stay, thou art so fair!* He is ecstatically happy at last because he has discovered charity.

And above all have fervent charity, for charity shall cover the multitude of sins. Now abideth faith, hope and charity – these three. But the greatest of these is charity. For he who would save his life shall lose it; but he who gives his life for my sake will save his soul alive