

*Sermon Trinity VII: Made in the Image of God*

I recently enjoyed a few days in Brighton. I recall the precedent established when we were at school: on the first day of term we were told to write a composition *What I did in the holidays*. So I'll tell you what I got up to in Brighton. I had imagined those few days would be a complete break, but of course theology always finds a way of intruding itself into the most indolent leisure. Two particular theological points arose during my short stay by the seaside and I will tell you about them in a minute.

As I was going to the exotic regions of the south coast I took one of my favourite books to read for the umpteenth time: Evelyn Waugh's great novel *Brideshead Revisited*. I was well into the exquisite loucheness of the early part of that novel by the time I arrived at St Bartholomew's church for High Mass last Sunday morning. When I was first ordained, this was the sort of church that my vicar and boss, the blunt Yorkshireman Howard Garside warned me against. He told me, *Stay away from London, Brighton and South Coast religion, Peter*.

But I never could. It draws me by its lights, sounds and movements: the luxurious theatre of the three priests in elegantly co-ordinated movements in the sanctuary. The colours of the altar and vestments – last week glorious red for St Peter. The aromatic blend of incense and red wine. The very good amateur choir singing a Mozart setting. The Sanctus bell proclaiming as it has done for more than 1000 years the Real Presence of Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament. This is the drama of our salvation set out in physical things – because we are physical beings too, bodies, parts and passions.

I entered the great Victorian Gothic brick interior of St Bartholomew's and I confess I was rather disappointed. Twenty years ago it would have been full of exquisite and devout young men in silk shirts and with their silver cigarette cases. Hospitable to visitors over drinks after the service, eager to converse about Aubrey Beardsley and Rudolf Nureyev and perhaps invite one to join the Doris Day fan club. Alas there were none of them. There weren't many people there at all.

But, if that was disappointing, what the preacher told us was worse. The church across the road, St Peter's, was to close – its very last Evensong that day. The preacher expressed his dismay that, as he put it, one of the possibilities for the future was for it to be taken over by the wealthy evangelicals of Holy Trinity Brompton who would hurtle down the London Road in their four-by-fours and establish an aisle-dancing establishment. You know they set up something called the Alpha course with pizza and Chianti. I'm thinking of starting an Omega course with sirloin steak and Claret.

Anyhow, the congregation at St Peter's was naturally distressed and they were arguing about the future. The preacher said they were like cats and dogs. The preacher was against cats. He said cats are creatures which do not much like their master. They wish only to be fed with familiar food in the house to which they have got accustomed. Dogs, he said, were much to be preferred because they were devoted to their master and would follow him wherever he went. Dogs are not attached to particular places. This strangulated zoological analogy he developed of course to describe two sorts of Christians: the catty sort – bad; the doggy sort – good.

This was the first theological intrusion into my holiday idleness. I'm afraid I could not help starting to think. And I was wondering what you St Michael's people would have made of that sermon. Is it really so simple? Of course we don't worship bricks and mortar, glass and stone. But surely there is a legitimate sense of place – a sense central to our spiritual observances? Look at the importance the Jews put on the actual building, the Temple. Think of the great cathedrals.

Think of our own parish church. Christianity is not an abstraction: it is full of *things*, and things become familiar, affectionate. Our parish church is not an obstacle to worship but a very precious aid to reflection. And it is where we meet one another, our neighbours whom we are commanded to love. I don't know about you, but there's quite a bit of the cat about me and I'm not ashamed of it.

Anyhow, since there were no exquisite young men around who might engage me in talk of the higher aesthetics, I did the next best thing and opened *Brideshead Revisited* again. It's full of religious mystery and religious fun. As when the agnostic Charles Ryder prays at the deathbed of Lord Marchmain: *O God, if there is a God, forgive him his sins, if there is such a thing as sin.*

Then there is Father Mowbray's instruction class for the social climber, Rex:

*He's the most difficult convert I have ever met. He doesn't seem to have the least intellectual curiosity or natural piety. I asked him if Our lord had more than one nature. He said, "Just as many as you say, Father" I said, "Suppose the Pope looked up and said it was going to rain would that be bound to happen?"*

*"Oh yes, Father"*

*"But supposing it didn't rain?"*

*"He said, "I suppose it would be sort of raining spiritually, only we were too sinful to see it."*

But in all the fun, in all the wit and wisdom of *Brideshead* and the beautiful, haunting pictures Evelyn Waugh paints of persons and places, there lurks something troubling, a cause to me of deep dissatisfaction – the sort of dissatisfaction I felt over the preacher's distinction between cat Christians and dog Christians. In the Christian faith portrayed by Waugh in *Brideshead* there is another distinction, absolute and unsatisfactory and somewhat mechanical. And by this he seems to set a limit to the Grace of God.

It comes to a climax at the deathbed of Lord Marchmain where all his family are terrified that he will die without making his confession, and so will end up in eternal damnation. But the same notion runs all through the novel: this absolute contrast between blessedness and damned souls. The truth is different. Human beings are never simply one thing or t'other. This extreme view comes close to dualism, to the Manichean heresy against which St Augustine had so many telling things to say.

Yes, we are wicked. We think and do bad things. We are all to an extent depraved. But we are not entirely bad. We are not totally depraved. As St Irenaeus taught, we

are all subject to Original Sin, but the Image of God is not completely obliterated within us. If we were utterly depraved, then we should not even be able to make the slightest response to God's overtures of redemption.

But we are, thank God, able to make the small response required to allow the love of God to pour into our hearts. Sometimes our response is anguished, when we suddenly become aware of our faults and we are sick of ourselves. Other times our response is full of light and love as we are moved by sheer beauty of person or place to recognise God's calling out to us.

But Evelyn Waugh is not consistent, thank God. He does in the end allow for the potency of that small human response to grace. The scene at Lord Marchmain's deathbed:

*The priest took the little silver box from his pocket and spoke again in Latin, touching the dying man with an oily wad. He finished what he had to do, put away the box and gave the final blessing. Suddenly Lord Marchmain moved his hand to his forehead. I thought he had felt the touch of the Chrism and was wiping it away. "O God," I prayed "don't let him do that!"*

*But there was no need for fear. The hand moved slowly down his breast, then to his shoulder and Lord Marchmain made the sign of the Cross... A phrase came back to me from my childhood, "And the veil of the Temple was rent from the top to the bottom..."*