

HOMILY FOR LENT

‘A woman preaching is like a dog’s walking on its hind legs. It is not done well, but you are surprised to find it done at all,’ Boswell, quoting Samuel Johnson in 1763. Be thankful I am not here to preach but to deliver a homily. It’s different.

I spoke in this Church four years ago and no-one could hear a word I said. The sound system was not in place. God was looking after me. Better that I was not heard. I spoke out of ignorance. I had only recently become a Christian and knew next to nothing then about the organisation I had joined. I now know too much for comfort. I was christened in St John’s Hampstead and confirmed in St Pauls. I saw only beautiful traditional churches dedicated to the glory of God, heard only a liturgy which had grown out of the original faith in a language which reflected that glory and precision, heard only the kind of music we have had here this evening; came to the faith, in other words, in a framework in which it was easy to renounce the humanist creed in which I had been reared and become a member of the Church of England.

I spoke in those early innocent days about a journey in personal faith and compared the Christian church to a great ship in uncharted seas sailing to safe harbour. It was accompanied on its way, this mother ship, by a host of little bobbing craft, different sects and creeds crowding up alongside, as in those Dunkirk scenes we see on the BBC. It was a great vision but it was naive. I think it was by and large a rather ladylike ship, with the Anglicans on the bridge, the Catholics swinging incense from the yard arm, the gloomy Calvinists somewhere well aft, and the happy clappies with their bongo drums kept safely battened below decks. I thought that at the helm were the blessed, the wise, and the good, because these were all I had met. The ship had been sailing for two thousand years and would sail on forever.

I spoke to soon, if, as it happens, inaudibly. I was too sanguine. I begin to feel the great ship is being scuttled by its own admirals, who have fine intentions but little wisdom and sometimes, one thinks, even less faith. I go to Churches up and down the country and I do not recognise the prayers. The service seems increasingly an exercise in group therapy rather than an expression of faith or acknowledgement of

sin. The new hymns are banal and embarrassing. The more the Church dumbs down its liturgy in the attempt to please, the fewer people are inclined to go. The more its vicars try to be up to date, to attract youth, the worse it gets. The people are not so easily manipulated: they would rather not go at all than sit in the gloomy shadow of what was once so vivid, so powerful, and now becomes bathetic. So they don't go. While the General Synod talks about the possibility of one of the three kings being a woman, while bishops see Islam as being on equal terms with Christianity, and the Prince becomes Defender of the Faiths, the rest of us begin to think we may well yet have to take to the lifeboats. Even this church we are in today, St Michael's Cornhill, a Wren Church with a Hawksmoor tower, with its tradition of music to the greater glory of God, - Henry Purcell was organ master here - its service to the City of London, none of this is safe. Too many Churches in the City as it is, some complain: they're anachronistic, if the Church is in financial trouble couldn't they be sold off and put to better use and greater profit as wine bars, as the banks have been: and if the general public still insists on a spiritual content, you could always use the old vestries for astrology classes and free aromatherapy to the poor and humble.

Look a hundred years ahead and what do you see? This Church, standing here, its congregation still strong, its liturgy broadly unchanged, the Church year linked to the great Christian festivals, or will it be some kind of heritage centre where the old fashioned are invited to pause a while to worship the God of their choice. I daresay Christmas is still fairly safe, because of the commercial investment, but the cards now say happy holidays, or seasonal greetings, not Merry Christmas, to avoid giving offence. And few cards make any reference to the religious ceremony. I believe all that must change, will change, if the admirals are to come to their senses and the great ship is to change course and avoid the rocks.

The road to hell is paved with good intentions, that's the trouble. The admirals have not the least idea how damaging their actions are. They are like the scientists at Chernobyl, testing their machines to the limit and in so doing melting down the whole caboodle. They have lost sight of the Church militant, they worship a touchy feely God, the God of therapism and high self esteem. They have broken the First commandment, '*Thou shalt have no other God than me.*' Original sin is out of fashion; therapism leads us into the idea that we were all born good, it is just that

others make us bad. This perception of the self seeps out into the wider community in all sorts of unfortunate ways. We turn into a litigious, self regarding, self congratulatory nation. We see the beam in others' eyes and seldom in our own. We blame our mothers and our fathers and our sisters and our brothers for what goes wrong in our lives. It can't be us doing it, because *we* are the good and nice ones. It must be them. Each government blames the one before for what goes wrong. It's painful to hear. To admit error does not happen. To feel guilt, that saving emotion, that saving grace of even the secular world, which is to the soul as pain is to the body, saving you from worse damage, is seen as absurd. Well, to say 'I'm sorry, my fault' can no doubt have financial repercussions, as any driver knows. In the Soham investigation the Chief Constable admits that regrettable mistakes occurred, but no-one is to be taken to task. Tragedies, public and private, are diminished into 'a learning experience' – guilt and shame no longer ravages the private soul. Death may well have lost its sting and grave its victory – if only because we go to grief therapists and pay them to bring about 'closure.' Better to pray for the forgiveness of our sins.

Without the concept of original sin we are lost, without the general confession we become each his or her own little Nero or Caligula, wondering how best to exercise our next consumer choice, congratulating ourselves the while on our proper thinking. Seeing ourselves as we do not at all 'not fit', but too grand, to pick up the crumbs from under the Lord's table. See how quickly everywhere in the land the pews become chairs – how difficult for us it is to humbly kneel – we need to be able to push back the chairs and join in on the Bongo drums. And instead of declaring heresy the bishops stand by and murmur God is love in all religions, and the Synod worries about which of the three kings was the woman.

Do we take to the lifeboats? Do we let the great ship of the Church founder? I hope not. I live in Dorset now: to listen to the comfortable words and be comforted according to the Book of Common Prayer, I must travel twenty miles, and that at 7.30 on a Sunday morning. Sometimes I fail in my intent and listen to the service on the radio instead, and that serves me right - - so embarrassing it can be in its craven desire to win approval I am almost ashamed to profess myself a Christian, for fear of the company I am seen to be in .

At the St Valentine Day Service the Sunday before last the radio priest confided in us that she is lonely and longs for a partner. I think that is too much information. But perhaps I am being unkind. She was really nice and made me feel we were all in this unholy mess together – the breakdown of society as we know it, that is - and in her belief that love was the answer, and God was love, albeit a rather more romantic personal kind of love than I had hitherto assumed, almost convincing. But you wouldn't get Peter Mullen preaching a sermon like that.

I resolved there and then I would give up hubris for Lent. And chocolate bars, and wine, of course? I would battle with my soul and not my diet. Hubris is the sin of pride, of thinking yourself better than others. Thinking you know how the Synod should behave, teaching the Archbishop of Canterbury to suck eggs, setting yourself up against bishops... Angered because in the face of the law of the land my local Bishop, in Salisbury, tries to expunge the Book of Common Prayer in his diocese. I will remember my good fortune - I am not encouraged in my faith but neither am I persecuted. I shall give up hubris, intellectual vanity, discontent for Lent. I shall remember the words of Isaiah, **'Woe unto them that are wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight...'** I shall also remember what he went on to say **'Woe unto them that call evil 'good', and good 'evil'; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness...'** Because that's not my hubris talking, and it wasn't Isaiah's.

Fay Weldon

23rd February 2003

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