

Sermon St Paul 2004...

St Paul is, I would say, second only to Our Lord himself in the creation of our faith. Jesus demonstrated the faith, showed us what it is. Paul tries to explain it, give us an account of it, says what the faith is. And for Paul the whole problem is crisis: he is afraid of death, of nothingness; and he is equally afraid of sin. He is always therefore on the edge of two critical emotions: despair and self-disgust. His letters in the New Testament and his incessant wanderings about the Mediterranean were an attempt to demonstrate what progress he had made in trying to resolve his crisis.

I think the great mass of mankind simply wonder what all the fuss is about. Crisis - what crisis? Most people are not too worried about problems concerning the meaning of life or in despair on account of their moral failings. They are usually far too eager to point out the failings of others. Most people would simply rather go fishing or watch a video. The fact remains that our religion is here to give answers to questions that will not go away: what is the meaning of our existence; how do we cope with our own moral imperfection? How, in plainer words, do we live in the presence of sin and death?

When you look at the Christian faith, you see that, whatever else it is, it is not trivial. Perhaps some will say it is false, or that it is too hard for anyone to follow. But it is about something. And what it is about is the two-horned problem of sin and death. I am often struck by what seems to me to be an absurdity - I mean the models on the catwalk who decorate their necks with the crucifix. What do they think the cross means? Is it an ornament? Is it like pearls? But these are pearls were his eyes. The very shape of the cross - an opposition, a contradiction - exemplifies the crisis which was St Paul's lifelong obsession.

Our religion provides the answers to certain fundamental questions about life and death, good and evil. If you don't have these problems, then, frankly, religion is not for you. But these issues have a way of insinuating themselves nonetheless - no matter how devoted you might be to fishing or watching videos. We have illness or children who go wrong. Our closest relationships break down. Why? Or perhaps one day we simply and suddenly confront ourselves with the sure and certain knowledge that we are not as worthy as we thought we were. These are crises. These are the problems to which St Paul applied himself remorselessly. And humankind is divided between those who think that these questions are the only questions worth thinking about, and those others - perhaps the majority - who think St Paul is merely a bore.

Forgive me though for saying that the issue is not so simple. And we have to look at it the other way around. The problems of the meaning of life and death, good and evil, the reconciliation of tragedy, are what make everything else possible. Creation comes out of chaos. Art comes out of anxiety. Or do you think that Dante wrote *The Inferno* or Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth* just because on that particular afternoon there wasn't much on the telly? Too many people waste their lives in that drowsy reverie between tea and cucumber sandwiches and the late night movie. Or they think that they will give themselves to their children. For what - to make their children as trivial and unreflective as they are themselves?

T.S. Eliot wrote, "Some forms of ill-health, debility or anaemia may produce an outpouring of poetry in a way approaching automatic writing - though, in contrast to claims

usually made for the latter, the material has obviously been incubating within the poet. It seems that these moments, which are characterised by the sudden lifting of anxiety and fear which presses upon our daily life so steadily that we are unaware of it, what happens is something negative - that is to say not an inspiration as we commonly think of it, but the breaking down of strong habitual barriers which tend to reform very quickly.”

In other words, in order to create something powerful and genuine you have to let yourself be vulnerable. There is no creativity without creative tension. In order to make something, you have first to break something. I suggest with the utmost reverence that God made the world because he believed he had to. And the act of creation broke his heart because he knew what it would entail - the torture and death of his only Son.

*The dove descending breaks the air with flame of incandescent terror..
We only live, only suspire to be redeemed from fire by fire*

As God the Holy Ghost said, “Thou art mine only Son with whom I am delighted.”

So what is St Paul on about? He is a pharisee, but not a self-righteous pharisee. He knows the value of the Law but - unlike the editors of the tabloid newspapers - he sees that the Law puts him in the wrong. He sees that the only way he can be relieved of his burden of sin and guilt is by a supreme act of grace: God’s gratuitous action, if you like. This is what dawned on him on that Damascus road when Christ appeared to him: in plain and ecstatic words: *Since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection from the dead; for as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.* What we cannot do for ourselves, Christ does for us, and that is to deliver us surely from the burdens of sin and death.

This is the meaning of life. This, as they say, is what it’s all about. And God who is himself creator asks us to join him in his creative work. This involves pain for us as it did for him. But it leads to revelation and joy because it makes something new and fresh. *The whole world groaning in travail until now*

Well, you might say - and I’ll join you - I don’t know much about this business of redemptive creativity and the resolution of the paradoxes of grace: I’m not St Paul; I’m not Leonardo; I’m not Beethoven. But ask then what is the most creative thing any of us can do; and the answer is in how we look after one another. After all his magnificent and inspired theological dialectic, St Paul begins his greatest chapter with which I shall finish this sermon:

Yet shew I unto you a more excellent way... Though I speak with the tongues of men and angels and have not love, I am become as sounding brass or tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy and understand all mysteries and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not love, I am nothing.

And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned and have not love, it profiteth me nothing. Love suffereth long, and is kind; love envieth not; love vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up; doth not behave itself unseemly; seeketh not her own; is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth;

Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. Love

never faileth. But whether there be prophecies they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge it shall pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away.

When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part, but then shall I know even as I am known.

And now abideth faith, hope, love; but the greatest of these is love