

First Sunday in Lent – 2018

South African politics is once again in the news, as a new President is elected and as once again the people look forward with renewed hope; we join our prayers with theirs. Desmond Tutu after the fall of the Apartheid regime described South Africa as the 'Rainbow Nation' an illusion to the reading we heard these morning as God declares a new covenant, a new way of creation living together under God, under the symbol of the rainbow.

Politics is one of the triumvirate of dinner party conversation stoppers. It is guaranteed to cause embarrassment at best and at worst a blazing row and Socialism it seems is one of political movements that creates the most heat. You'll be glad to hear that I am not about to raise the temperature; but I have been intrigued by those 19th century figures that described themselves as 'Christian Socialists.' One of these figures was Bishop Charles Gore and the reason I became interested in him was because he was the founder of the Community of the Resurrection. I spent a term at the College that the community founded in Mirfield, West Yorkshire as part of my preparation for ordination. Bishop Gore wrote a thesis called *Lux Mundi – light of the world* in which he explored the humanity of Jesus. He thought deeply about that passage in the letter to the Philippians when Paul speaks of Jesus emptying himself of his divinity becoming a servant, Gore's calling was to correlate Christian theology with scientific and historical knowledge and translate it into social action.

Gore founded the order in 1892, the Mirfield Community House is near Huddersfield at that time a centre of the burgeoning Industrial Revolution. The community is governed by a constitution, in one part it reads: *the community's charism, its gifted 'way'... is to live the baptismal vocation through a commitment to community life, sustained by common worship, and issuing in works that are primarily of a public character.* In modern times the Community were involved in South Africa and many brothers worked there. Among them was Bishop Trevor Huddleston of whom Nelson Mandela was to say 'no white person has done more for South Africa.' Charles Gore described himself as a socialist but not in the way we think of that term, his socialism was a response to individualism, something as relevant today as then. What I learned at Mirfield was that it is in community that we can become what we are truly called to be, in community we relinquish control and we can truly understand that idea of the body that St Paul speaks of with its individual parts working together. The industrial revolution changed the way people lived and interacted with each other. In the factories and mills the workers were very much individual parts but the idea of the body was missing. In much the same way the digital revolution today is connecting us in amazing ways and yet the sense of community, the body, is missing. Such changes in society create poverty in many different ways; in our day a poverty of engagement.

One of the issues of our time is our increasingly isolated, 'virtual' way of living – we engage constantly through the medium of the internet, we work from home alone, study alone, are entertained on our own, we live in the unreality of the twittersphere, we have 1000s

of Facebook friends, the problem is that we increasingly don't know how to engage properly, carefully, lovingly. We are after all fully human when we engage, care, love, in theological speak communion is an 'ontological category,' in other words togetherness is a way of being.

In all three gospel accounts of Jesus' baptism he has a vision: at that moment heaven and earth are one, the Spirit descends like a dove on him and the voice comes from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.' In all three accounts from there Jesus is driven by the Spirit into the wilderness. Matthew and Luke go on to describe the Devil's tempting, or perhaps more correctly, testing of Jesus. The devil it seems is responding to the voice from the clouds and he questions Jesus... 'if you are the Son of God, if you are the beloved.'

Mark's gospel is sparse on detail and we really have a sense of that this morning, the account of the wilderness experience gives little away. After the baptism of Jesus we read quite simply: And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

What is going on? Mark's gospel opens with a fanfare: The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. At the Jordan Jesus has that great vision, the message is clear: Jesus is the anointed one. Yet he calls himself the Son of Man. Can we say that what is being tested then in Mark is Jesus' humanity, the Spirit drives Jesus into isolation because it is only then that he can appreciate the nature of his being, the wilderness is the antithesis of community. The Spirit seems to place Jesus in that very place where the Devil wants him to be. The Devil is saying what kind of person are you? What kind of humanity will be revealed in you? Can we perhaps imagine that the devil prefaced his testing by saying 'If you are the Son of Man, if you are truly human....?' Jesus returns to Galilee and begins to gather people together answering that very question: this is what kind of humanity I will model, profound community. Again, can we say that isolation is the devil's work, separation from each other and from God? And is this what our Lenten journey is ultimately about, facing up to the temptation of just retreating into our own little world, holding fast to our own fantasies about God and about the stranger down the road. Engaging in a virtual world that we can control.

It is a little strange how Lent is viewed by many both inside and outside the church; the mantra of 'giving up' something is ever present. It is more akin to New Year with its resolutions that we rarely keep. The prophetic tradition of the Old Testament and the life and words of Jesus fly in the face of this thinking. How often do the prophets tell us that our fasts are meaningless in the face of injustice, look at Amos, Isaiah, Hosea, Micah. Disconnection from one another creates injustice.

Robert Herrick was a cleric at the time of Cromwell's Commonwealth in the 1600s. He wasn't enamored by the Puritans, refused to sign up to the new ways and lost his job. This

is one of the poems he wrote which I think gives voice to what Lent is all about. It's simply called Lent

Is this a fast, to keep
The larder lean?
And clean
From fat of veals and sheep?
Is it to quit the dish
Of flesh, yet still
To fill
The platter high with fish?

Is it to fast an hour,
Or ragg'd to go,
Or show
A downcast look and sour?
No; 'tis a fast to dole
Thy sheaf of wheat,
And meat,
Unto the hungry soul.

It is to fast from strife,
From old debate
And hate ;
To circumcise thy life.
To show a heart grief-rent;
To starve thy sin,
Not bin;
And that's to keep thy Lent.

Amen.