

## **A Holiness worth Having**

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*Leviticus 19:1-2,15-18; Psalm 1; 1 Thessalonians 2:1-13; Matthew 22:34-46*

‘You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.’ So says the Lord to Moses, according to our Old Testament reading today. What are we to make of this divine invitation for us to share in God’s own way of life, to be holy like God? Many Christian people, and many Churches, think that holiness means an anxious purity, choosy about the company it keeps, spiritually superior and dismissive of the common herd—a kind of brittle, sexless perfectionism, unattractive and off-putting. Holiness and niceness blur in many Anglican minds, too—we’re the Church, as one of my theological teachers put it, which confuses bad taste with sin!

We see this sort of self-conscious, even self-assertive, holiness at work in today’s major disputes within our worldwide Anglican Communion, when worried Church leaders seek to protect the Bible against this or that modern discovery or insight, as if the things of God have to be protected from the world and the people that the biblical God plainly loves. This is a fragile holiness that depends on putting others down, and I for one think it demonstrates a lack of faith. There are many Anglicans and Anglican leaders, for instance, keen on splitting our Church because some of us refuse to get upset when two men or two women seek to live happily, tenderly and monogamously together with the Church’s blessing, or when someone seeks to be ordained without being dishonest about their sexual orientation, contrary to the regular Anglican norm of ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’, or when women are welcomed to the altar and to the bishop’s throne because many of us believe that our image of God is incomplete if we insist on an all-male priesthood. An example: the Nigerian Anglicans are so holy, apparently, that they’ve removed all reference to the Church of England from their Church’s constitution—in case their holiness is compromised by association with such a bunch of bible-denying liberals as the C of E. Could this be nothing but the post-colonial rage of which that damaged intellectual Frantz Fanon wrote, on the part of those he called ‘the wretched of the earth,’ but in this case dressed up as biblical holiness?

We see this nervy, defensive, self-assertive version of holiness at work in our gospel today, when a group of religious leaders try to trap Jesus in his words. They test Jesus on the holiness meter, to see if he’s ‘biblically sound’. And of course Jesus has lost patience with all of this, if he ever had any. He shows them that he understands the Bible far better than they do, though of course this wins him no respect. This is not a fair fight; there’s nothing fair, or just, or Godly, in fact, in their approach. Jesus is just too knockabout for the pure and holy. He mixes with sinners, and claims to act in God’s name as if God actually loved everybody and had no favourites! And where would religion be if that were actually true? No, this Jesus has to go, and to get rid of him his enemies show their hand. They show how little the sacred texts and truths of their religion really mean to them by using them as a weapon to entrap Jesus. The things of God become tools of violent self-assertion in their dysfunctional religion. Jesus suffers for his commitment to the things of God, as the prophets always have, because the things of God aren’t what many people seek from their religion.

The alternative, the real holiness, is the sort of thing we see in St Paul as a religious leader in our 1 Thessalonians passage today. Here is Paul at his most attractive, his most pastoral. This is Paul’s first letter, and the earliest New Testament book to be written—a generation before the gospels were composed. Yet, despite its early origins, we find in this passage a

recognisably priestly spirituality: ‘So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God’, Paul writes, ‘but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us’. Here is a recognisably Catholic understanding of priestly leadership based in pastoral relationship and in genuine personal engagement, so the leader is not just preacher and teacher, but approaches those roles only in the context of a patient and loving commitment to the people of God. Not ideology first, in other words, as is the case whenever militant evangelicalism sets the tone, but pastoral commitment.

Interesting, too (by the way), is the joint male and female imagery that Paul uses to reinforce this point. ‘We dealt with each one of you like a father with his children,’ Paul writes, and from this biblical source I justify the venerable title of ‘father’ for our male clergy, not as a sign of patriarchal domination as is regularly feared, but as a call to everything that is nurturing and responsible in me and in my brother priests, bringing out the best in us. But Paul also uses feminine imagery—that of nursing: ‘But we were gentle among you’, he writes, ‘like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children’. I’m struck here that our first hint of the priestly, pastoral ideal that would develop in later Christian tradition—a hint appearing in this passage from the earliest New Testament book—uses both masculine and feminine imagery for the priestly role: that of both fathers and nurses tenderly caring for God’s children. I wonder what you think about the title ‘father’ being matched for women priests by the title ‘matron’? You might like to try that out on your priest, Rebecca, and see if she likes it!

Friends, I digress. Let’s look a little more at the sort of *holiness* Paul demonstrates in this passage. He makes clear that his appeal to the Thessalonians Christians is not an appeal out of any selfish motive: it’s not partial or fearfully self-preserving, and it’s as bold and assured as it is tender and patient. Because Paul and his companions are sure of the love and calling of God that grounds their mission, they have nothing to prove, and so they can be genuinely open with people, tolerant, patient, magnanimous—because they don’t feel threatened, they don’t have to impose their will on others.

This is the sort of holiness the Lord commends to Moses, in our Old Testament reading this morning. It’s a holiness made manifest in a commitment to just and fair dealing, not nervously seeking our advantage or currying favour. It’s a holiness made manifest in refusing to hate the rich or the poor, as ideologues of the left or else of the right in today’s political culture are prone to do: those of the left showing contempt for the establishment, blaming Wall Street for a culture-wide malaise of irresponsible greed in the West, for instance, while those of the establishment continue to show contempt for the poor, and for working people, as was ever the case—because all weak egos need somebody to put down. It’s a holiness, too, that will not slander or do harm within the community of God’s people—though, as we know, many of our congregations these days are regularly blighted by both open and passive aggression, by slander and gossip—with faithful clergy regularly driven to despair, and bishops to perplexity—while Church leaders say dreadful things about other Church leaders who they don’t think are as holy as they are. None of this is acceptable, however, according to our Old Testament reading today, and none of it is remotely like the holiness of God.

The holiness of God, as it emerges from our readings today, is a robust, self-assured, no-chip-on-the-shoulder approach to life. It’s revealed in an attitude of magnanimity—that is, of large-souled-ness-which doesn’t see others primarily as a threat.

Our God is holy because our God is generous, life giving, secure in Godself. ‘I am who I am’ is the confident identity that our God reveals to Moses. Ours is not some nery, puny tribal god whose chief characteristic is his opposition to somebody else’s tribe and tribal god. Our God is the real, universal God, and sure enough of Godself not to be as insecure as many of

God's followers turn out to be. Our God is holy, as Professor John Webster of Oxford University teaches, not because our God is turned away from us in self-preserving withdrawal. Rather, our God is holy because our God is turned towards us,<sup>1</sup> loving and accepting us, not afraid of us and our world and our complicated lives, but open to us, not fazed by us.

Friends, this is the holiness you and I are called to share, in which we're baptised and confirmed, and in which we're gathered precisely as the sinners we are here at the Lord's Table. Our God's version of holiness replaces anxious religion with a robustly secular open-heartedness, and a spirit of generosity toward our fellow human beings. This is the attractive holiness of Jesus, in fact, rather than the repulsive holiness of many who use his name, and claim to serve his cause.

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<sup>1</sup> John Webster. *Holiness* (London: SCM Press, 2003).