

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany 2017

The question was posed recently from the pulpit ‘what are we here for?’ What is our purpose, what ought we to do? I suggested that purpose was to worship. But what then, what ought we to do, then? This is a questions of ethics and it poses another question: is there such a thing as a Christian ethic? Those of you who were at the Candlemas celebrations a little over a week ago would know that I have been enjoying the poetry of Robert Browning and this week I came across a particular favourite:

*The year's at the spring,
And day's at the morn;
Morning's at seven;
The hillside dew pearled;
the lark's on the wing;
the snails on the thorn:
God's in his heaven – All's right with the world.*

How romantic; then read the newspaper. I crashed back to earth and in a mad rush realised that world is not right...and then the awful thought, the logical outcome: does this mean that God not in his heaven? Well, after a moment of prayer and thought, the panic subsided and I calmed down and remembered that God is a parent and a parent's role as their children grow and mature is not to control, but to love. God does not control us, God is not in control; God is love is, and the nature of love is not to control. The outcome of this of course is that we have free will and with that comes choice. Browning again:

*White shall not neutralize the black, nor good
Compensate bad in man, absolve him so:
Life's being just the terrible choice.*

Living is about choosing, we are constantly choosing. Most of our choices are very mundane, our shops are filled to overflowing with every conceivable thing and food to choose. But of course we don't live our lives in supermarkets, many in our world could barely conceive of the choices we enjoy. No, our choices are sometimes more difficult: Whom shall I marry, which charity should I support, should I resign from this political party because it has lost its way, should I leave the church for the same reasons. Should I become a vegetarian? And then there are incredibly difficult, profound choices, end of life issues, should I end my marriage or long term relationship, how do I deal with any aging parent or a drug addicted child. For many of these choices there are no rules, no laws and we may harbour doubts about our decisions; ultimately they reflect the kind of people we are, our circumstances, our upbringing and experiences, many of these things are beyond our control, some are not.

Winston Churchill once famously said that “Democracy is the worst form of government, except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.” We do live in interesting times as far as democracy is concerned, in our nation as well as many other countries in the west democracy is certainly under strain. A key plank of democratic

thinking is freedom. We are free to express ourselves, elect our representatives (and remove them), gather together, and worship freely and openly. Democracy emphasizes the importance of the individual in society and as such reveals an important Christian ideal – we are all equal, all made in the image of God. These are all important ideas, they are largely taken for granted such is the nature of our nation and its constitution. We are very lucky indeed. But is democracy straining under the weight of too much freedom. Can there be such a thing as too much freedom, have we indeed pushed it too far? Has our freedom become a heresy? Heresy is always the distortion or exaggeration of something true. Democracy offers freedoms and choices that many in world do not enjoy but they can, if pushed, become distorted.

Heresy comes from the Greek *Hairesis*, meaning ‘Choice’. In this context it is the choosing of one element, or idea at the expense of others. Yes we have freedom and many are choosing to exercise their rights to greater freedoms but in our Biblical tradition we are also rightly constrained. Paul’s letter to the Galatians is described as the Magna Carta of Christian Liberty, describing as it does our freedom from the Mosaic Law for our salvation. Paul writes: *For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters.* However he goes on telling his correspondents: *only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’* Do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence; and Browning again:

*There’s a great text in Galatians,
Once you trip on it, entails
Twenty-nine distinct damnations,
One sure, if another fails.*

I haven’t counted them; there might be twenty-nine damnations, what Paul calls ‘works of the flesh,’ and I feel sure that most of us have had a go at one or two. I won’t list them! Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount says that not one jot not one letter will pass from the law. But Jesus knows that we can never fulfill all the requirements of the law. Even if outwardly we keep the law, he knows the secrets of our hearts. We are never completely free from the things that constraint us, our own faults and failings, the multitude of things over which we can have little, if any, control and the terrible choices we sometimes have to make. Complete freedom is really an illusion – a heresy, the law remains; it is an ideal we strive for, but we should never read these texts in isolation from the entire gospel witness. To do so condemns us to misery and self-loathing, let alone having one hand and one eye!

The biblical gospel is not that humans can save themselves inwardly or that whatever happens outwardly is meant to be. But rather that a personal God, does not control them, but loves them. *Absolve him so*; yes human sin and suffering are real, that forgiveness and charity are also real is the good news that does not grow old. We can, indeed we should choose to participate in the life of Christ, in the words of Rowan Williams – find out what God’s doing and get involved. To get involved is to know forgiveness, and knowing this forgiveness to both give and receive joy. The embodiment of joy is all the Christian ethic has ever been or will be. Amen.