

Hinde Street Methodist Church

Wednesday 17 February 2021 @ 7pm - Ash Wednesday

Rev John Swarbrick

Joel 2: 1–2, 12–17

Matthew 6: 1–6, 16–21

Being More Human in Lent

WE CHRISTIANS have given Lent a bad name. It's the season of gloom and giving up, of ashes and lashes. The prophet Joel captures something of this introspective mood. Lent is when we feel guilty about not feeling guilty . . . when we wonder what to substitute for an old-fashioned fast . . . when the risen Christian pretends that Christ is not yet risen . . . when the Church's proclamation is not 'Rejoice!' but 'Repent!' We're a bit like Private Fraser in *Dad's Army*—the personification of a wet, Presbyterian Sunday afternoon. One minute we are intoning, 'We're all doomed', the next we say reassuringly, 'I never doubted ye for a minute'.

It is a recipe for religious schizophrenia. A less charitable/flattering description would be hypocrisy. This is the charge levelled by Jesus against the Jewish religious leaders of his day;

'But when you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the street, so that they may be praised by others . . .

'And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others . . .

'And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting . . .'

It's an unattractive picture. But in modern times, we have begun to learn more about the Pharisees—their tremendous idealism and the seriousness with which they addressed moral issues. Even all that ritual cleansing seems to have had a laudable purpose: an attempt to make all life holy, the home no less than the Temple; the aspiration to live in accordance with the will and purpose of God as summarized in the Ten Commandments. What then happens is a tension between idealism and reality. That tension is called hypocrisy. Originally, the word hypocrite meant simply an actor in a play—in other words, someone literally putting on a mask. Ever since Jesus' use of the word in the Gospels, it has become a term of abuse. And if anything, Jesus makes the tension between idealism and reality even more unmanageable.

Our Gospel reading is part of the Sermon on the Mount. There we learn that not merely is killing wrong, but even being angry with your brother in your heart; not just adultery, but even fancying someone is wrong; not merely false witness against your neighbour, but any telling of lies that makes oath-taking necessary as a guarantee of the truth, and so on—all summed up in the impossibly high demand:

'Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.'

Matthew 5: 48

Jesus builds this tension between ideal and reality into the very heart of his ethical message and into our pattern of discipleship. Inevitably, with that goes the temptation towards hypocrisy. Although *for God all things are possible* (Matthew 19: 26), very few of us are likely to get remotely near to that ideal. To some it can mean leaving faith behind, or becoming impossibly confused about what is ethically required of us, or turning towards some form of self-deceiving hypocrisy.

But Christ is not asking the unattainable of us. He offers us a clear way out of that tension which keeps the ideal still firmly in focus. What he suggests is that our attempts to live up to

the ideal are sustainable only if we have constantly before our eyes the image of God's forgiveness, requested daily in the Lord's Prayer. That, too, is part of the Sermon on the Mount:

'And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.'

Matthew 6: 12

Tomorrow, 18 February, marks the anniversary of the death of the German reformer, Martin Luther in 1546. Even though I am a loyal Methodist and cherish the legacy of our fathers in God, John and Charles Wesley, my great hero in the faith—if heroes are still allowed these days—is Martin Luther. What a bundle of contradictions the man was! The monk who was refreshingly fearful of his own frailty—'I am dust and ashes and full of sin'—becomes the earthy, fiery theologian and controversialist of the Protestant Reformation. The man whose pen can spew forth prose written in bile against his opponents is the same man who with a soft, pastoral heart hands back to ordinary people not only the Scriptures he translated for them into German, but the novel sense that God's people were their own priests and had some responsibility for their own salvation. The composer, hymnwriter and liturgist who shaped German musical culture in ways that flowed into the bloodstream of European classical music.

Many years ago now, I went to visit a friend of mine who was studying for a year in Heidelberg, which I think is the loveliest city in Germany. We went on a day trip to Worms—which in English looks like the word 'worms'. It's the sort of place you may only remember from history textbooks—and in any case the Diet of Worms is always good for a few schoolboy sniggers. In 1521 the town hosted a church disciplinary court which excommunicated Martin Luther. Not that it did any good. Near the site of the Diet is the beautiful *Dreifaltigkeitskirche*—the Church of the Holy Trinity. It was firebombed in the Second World War but, miraculously, was left standing. After the War, it was restored.

All around the interior walls are words carved into a thick layer of plaster. These are the words of Luther's Shorter Catechism: a simple manual of faith for Christians, written especially with children in mind. It is short, lucid and warm. It deals with only four things: the Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, and the sacraments. Here is part of it in an English translation:

I believe in God the Father, Maker of Heaven and Earth. What does that mean?

I believe that God has created me and all other creatures and has given me, and preserves for me, body and soul, eyes and ears, and all my limbs, my reason and all my senses; and that daily he bestows on me clothes and shoes, meat and drink, house and home, wife and child, fields and cattle, and all my goods, and supplies in abundance all needs and necessities of my body and life, and protects me from all perils, and guards and defends me from all evil. And this he does out of pure fatherly and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me; for which I am bound to thank him and praise him and, moreover, to serve and obey him. This is a faithful saying.

Well, there is the ideal—even down to clothes and shoes, fields and cattle. And in that unnervingly simple exposition of God's loving and gracious generosity, we can ponder the gap between ideal and reality:

'And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.'

Matthew 6: 12

We are certain to fail again and again, but on each occasion of failure, God is always there, more than willing to meet us and offers his help, so that we can start afresh.

What Martin Luther discovered—what each of us can discover—is that the tension between ideal and reality dissolves in the loving care of God. The problem for hypocrites is that they can't see this; they think either that everything depends on their own efforts, or that success is the only measure of human worth. So they try to disguise their failures in a life of pretence.

Yes, the gospel requires something of us; but it comes to us first and foremost as an offer, and God is always gentle. The tension between ideal and reality will always be there; that's inescapable. Without it, life could remain pretty much as it always has. We could persist in our cynicism and mediocrity, and forget that we are all caught up in that process which is aimed at changing the world, so that everyone can experience God's goodness and loving-kindness. For that to have a chance we are called to become the goodness of God—by letting God be God to us, and through us to others.

Remember, O Lord, what you have wrought in us,
and not what we deserve;
and as you have called us to your service,
make us worthy of our calling;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**