

Quiet Afternoon, Sunday 20th March, Lent 2

First Address

This afternoon I'd like us to look at the possibilities in Lent, and maybe to explore a few misconceptions about both the season and the implications for our relationship with God. I'd like us to ask ourselves what we really think Lent is about and what we imagine are the purposes of the various Lenten observations we undertake as part of our Lenten discipline – and even that is a word that's laden with meaning. In preparation for Lent, Fr. David put together some devotional material for the front of the Lent service books which he hoped would prove useful to people in periods of silence before services. One of the items he included was a poem by George Herbert and I was glad about that because it was this poem which provided the idea for this quiet afternoon, and it's one which I think is particularly appropriate during Lent. It's a well known poem, and I expect it will be familiar to most people here, but I'd like to read it anyway because, for me at least, it encapsulates perfectly the way in which we misunderstand God and our relationship with him. There's a lot of stuff worth looking at in this poem.

LOVE (III)

by George Herbert

Love bade me welcome, yet my soul drew back,
 Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-ey'd Love, observing me grow slack
 From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning
 If I lack'd anything.

"A guest," I answer'd, "worthy to be here";
 Love said, "You shall be he."
"I, the unkind, the ungrateful? ah my dear,
 I cannot look on thee."
Love took my hand and smiling did reply,
 "Who made the eyes but I?"

"Truth, Lord, but I have marr'd them; let my shame
 Go where it doth deserve."
"And know you not," says Love, "who bore the blame?"
 "My dear, then I will serve."
"You must sit down," says Love, "and taste my meat."
 So I did sit and eat.

We'll come back to some of the themes in this poem during the afternoon.

For many people, food looms large in Lent. Giving something up for Lent usually equates with doing without certain indulgences – and it's surprisingly widespread. Only last weekend, my son was telling me that all the people he works with have decided to give up chocolate and crisps for Lent – and there isn't a church-goer among them. (He also had to tell them when Lent finished and that Sundays in Lent were days off, which made him extremely popular).

But what do we think we're doing when we make these small sacrifices? Some of our Lenten hymns give us a decidedly wonky view of what we might be up to, it has to be admitted. "Forty

days and forty nights” is probably one of the best known hymns in our book, and it has a tune to die for, but all the same it has a few ideas in it which might surprise and even dismay the God who is described as Love in Herbert's poem.

“Shall not we thy sorrows share, and from earthly joys abstain. Fasting with unceasing prayer. Glad with thee to suffer pain”.

It's a bit of a mixed bag. As I mentioned on Sunday, the idea that we might dignify our own trivial acts of renunciation with the notion that we're sharing in the suffering of Christ, is presumptuous and indeed ridiculous. It's also impossible. The whole point about the death and resurrection of Christ is that he has borne in himself the pain and suffering of the world. Do we really think he did that so that we could make ourselves suffer unnecessarily - even if we could call the gestures we make suffering at all? Does that mean we needn't bother then? That we've been barking up the wrong tree and we can stop off at Tesco's on the way home for a wine box and a bar of Fruit and Nut? Maybe not.

Lurking in the middle of all the questionable assumptions in this verse of the hymn, there's the line “Fasting with unceasing prayer” - and that's the give away. Fasting isn't something we do just to make ourselves uncomfortable. We can't change a thing by just being hungry. Fasting is only useful in spiritual terms if it's connected to prayer. Bishop David Tustin said to me recently that fasting can produce a sense of heightened awareness that allows us more easily to tune ourselves to the mind of God. That's what our Lenten fast should be about. And becoming attuned to the mind of God can be a surprising journey. As the narrator of the poem found, the God we discover demands our love and offers us hospitality. Is it possible that, rather than seeing Lent as a time to scour our souls, we might begin to see it as an opportunity to look in our own cupboards and see what we might bring to the feast God invites us to?

In the next few minutes, I'd like us to make a start, if we haven't already. We will have some reasonably lengthy periods of silence this afternoon, because silence can't be suddenly switched on. It's more than an absence of conversation, more than passively sitting and waiting. Mother Mary Clare of the Sisters of the love of God says;

The most difficult and decisive part of prayer is acquiring this ability to listen. Listening is no passive affair, a space when we happen not to be doing or speaking. Inactivity and superficial silence do not necessarily mean that we are in a position to listen. Listening is a conscious willed action, requiring alertness and vigilance, by which our whole attention is focussed and controlled. Listening is in this sense a difficult thing. And it is decisive because it is the beginning of our entry into a personal and unique relationship with God in which we hear the call of our own special responsibilities for which God has intended us. Listening is the aspect of silence in which we receive the commission of God.

We'll meet here again at 3.45 and in the meantime, let's try to give God the chance to be heard. Let's do our best to put down the images of God we've made for ourselves and open up a space in ourselves for God to fill with his own reality and light. Especially, let's break the Lenten mould and specifically not ask God to light up our sins and shortcomings, but to offer him time and space to show us what gifts we have that we could bring something to his feast to share with others. If anybody wants to ask a question or talk about anything at any time this afternoon, I'm at your disposal, so don't feel you shouldn't interrupt!

Second Address

So after spending some time with God, I wonder how we feel. How easy is it to let go of the preconceptions we have? Sometimes it can be very difficult. One of the main reasons we spend so much time babbling at God in prayer is a subconscious defence mechanism – if we keep talking God won't be able to get a word in and we needn't be challenged. Somehow we know that an encounter with God will be a challenge. Maybe that seems odd after all the things we've said about God being love. Surely love shouldn't be disturbing, we might think – but we'd be wrong.

Love – real love – *is* profoundly disturbing. The problem is that we see too many sugary images of love in the media. Hearts and flowers, riding off into the sunset, the perfect wedding day and all that. It's fine for Mills and Boon, but it bears about as much relation to the love of God as the fluffy pink handcuffs in an Ann Summers shop do to restraints imposed on dangerous criminals. It's very superficial. The love we're talking about is the love which is strong enough to contain and sustain all creation. Nothing pink or fluffy about that at all.

It wouldn't be fair to expect me to do a session like this without mentioning my dear friend St Therese of Lisieux. Therese spent some time struggling to discover what was her particular calling from God. She knew from a very young age that she was called to be a Carmelite nun – and was even prepared to try to bully the pope no less into letting her enter the convent when she was only 15 - but was puzzled at first as to what that vocation really meant. Eventually she came to the conclusion that her job was to align herself with the love of God and in doing that love *for* God. The other Teresa – Teresa of Avila – is famous for her prayer about God having no hands but ours etc. Therese saw her role as being part of God's love, because God needs us to love for him as well as do practical things for him. This emphasis on love has become very much part of the Carmelite charism, with a well known slogan that Carmel represents “Love at the heart of the church”. Writing about her discovery, Therese says;

And I realised that this love was the true motive force which enabled other members of the church to act; if it ceased to function the Apostles would forget to preach the gospel, the Martyrs would refuse to shed their blood. Love in fact is the vocation which includes all others; it's a universe of its own, comprising all time and space – it's eternal.

But how easy do we really find it to accept the love God offers? The poem by George Herbert that kicked things off today shows a soul who struggles to believe in it, but who is eventually convinced and overcome by the love that God offers. If we're to do the same, we have to unpick a lot of culturally embedded ideas that do neither us nor God any service.

At a recent training day, the person leading it said that, regardless of the theology usually taught, on Good Friday it would be difficult to find a church which didn't end up preaching penal substitutionary atonement theory. Confronted with the reality of love and with the difficulty of expressing what happened on Calvary, the most enlightened and liberal thinkers fell back on the “it should have been me” model. (I did tell him he wouldn't get it here).

Maybe there are two problems here. One could just be the complexity of the theology surrounding the death of Christ and the fact that it's tempting to fall back on old ideas when we're struggling. But the other is more significant for us today, because it seems that we really do have difficulty in accepting that God is love, no matter how often we say it. And of course, if we can't really accept it as truth we can't really bring ourselves to believe in God's unconditional love for us so we never get chance to dig ourselves out of the mire of self-criticism and dislike that characterises so much popular Christian theology.

The feast that God longs to share with us shouldn't be spoiled by our insistence that we don't

deserve it at every mouthful. This isn't to say we should pretend that we're perfect. God's light has a habit of getting into the dark places inside us and showing up the grime, but it's to say that we shouldn't feel disabled by our failures. Herbert's poem shows Love gently putting aside objection after objection and drawing the soul gently towards the table, not to serve but as a much wanted guest. Love never denies the shortcomings of the guest, but welcomes him despite those shortcomings. Basically, God loves him too much to care. Years of being told how sinful we are can be hard to unpick, so don't try. Let's all accept that we're sinful, but let's try also to accept that that sinfulness is no impediment to the love and mercy of God. But we think that's offering an easy ride we'd be wrong. Therese knew that she was taking on something enormous when she recognised the need to embody God's love in the world, because to do that we have to be prepared to love as God loves. As God *truly* loves, not as we might think he should, but as he does. And the model for that is the cross - the God who loves and dies for the worst as well as the best. The owner of the vineyard who pays a full day's wages to the one who only worked an hour as well as to the ones who worked a full day. It's the reason we find love challenging, but it's also the only way to be free to enjoy the banquet God prepares for us. We stop being children saying "it's not fair". It isn't fair - it's love and that's quite different. Brother Roger of Taize wrote;

Only in love can I find you my God. In love the gates of my soul spring open, allowing me to breathe a new air of freedom and forget my own petty self. In love, my whole being streams forth out of the rigid confines of narrowness and anxious self-assertion, which make me a prisoner of my own poverty and emptiness. In love, all the powers of my soul flow out toward you, wanting never more to return but to lose themselves completely in you, since by your love you are the inmost centre of my heart, closer to me than I am to myself.

But when I love you, when I manage to break out of the narrow circle of self and leave behind the restless agony of unanswered questions, when my blinded eyes no longer look merely from afar and from the outside upon your unapproachable brightness, and much more when you yourself, O incomprehensible one, have become through love the inmost centre of my life, then I can bury myself entirely in you, O mysterious God, and with myself all my questions....

When I abandon myself in love, then you are my very life and your incomprehensibility is swallowed up in love's unity. When I am allowed to love you, the grasp of your very mystery becomes a positive source of bliss. Then the farther your infinity is removed from my nothingness, the greater is the challenge to my love. The more complete the dependence of my fragile existence upon your unsearchable counsels, the more unconditional must be the surrender of my whole being to you, beloved God. The more annihilating the incomprehensibility of your ways and judgements, the greater must be the holy defiance of my love. And my love is all the greater and more blessed, the less my poor spirit understands of you.

God of my life, incomprehensible, be my life. God of my faith, who leads me into your darkness - God of my love, who turns your darkness into the sweet light of my life, be now the God of my hope, so that you may one day be the God of my life, the life of eternal love.

In the next period of silence, perhaps we could take another step towards the God who invites us to his love feast, and this time ask ourselves what our contribution to the dinner party conversation might be. That's a harder question to answer than we might suppose, because once we've begun to let go of our preconditioned images of God, sometimes the ways of praying that we're used to begin to feel as if they don't quite fit. Often people find this very disconcerting and start to think they've lost the ability to pray. They panic and rush back to their old ideas, when in fact they were on the brink of a revelation about how God is and how unconfined God is.

So if the first period of silence, of listening for God, left you feeling a bit unsure, wondering if you

were really doing anything, try to believe that you were and that you still are. You may not want to do anything more than poke gently at the idea that God may not be as we've imagined him and just wait to see what that might suggest to us about what we think he expects of us. But don't lose sight of Herbert's reluctant guest, throwing up objection after objection, protesting his unworthiness at every opportunity, but being drawn steadily towards Love's table. Acknowledge yourself as a welcome guest in God's presence and then see what you might want to say over dinner.

Third Address

This is in some ways the hardest part of the afternoon for the person leading it, because I don't know where your periods of encounter might have taken you and it isn't my business to ask. By now you might just be thinking you've spent quite a bit of time sitting with a blank mind and you don't feel that you've done anything. You might be feeling that dropping long held ideas about God is just disorientating and you don't know what to put in their place. You might still be wondering if you really want to think of God in any different ways. Any or all of these are fine – there's nothing prescriptive about today. But no matter where we might be at this point, there are one or two things in the poem to bear in mind.

The first is that the purpose of sessions like today's are to take our minds away from ourselves and towards God – however we think God might be. The poem shows us how hard that can be. Despite Love's persistent and gentle invitation, the soul in the poem constantly returns to himself. At every invitation from Love, the soul counters with “but I've done this or that”. This is an easy trap to fall into, because we can feel as though we're being particularly saintly and humble by focussing on our unworthiness, but it can be nothing more than a smoke screen. We hide behind it so that we don't have to face God directly. We shy away from God's invitation but dress our unwillingness and rejection up as humility – and we do it without even realising most of the time.

What we're avoiding are the demands of love – the demands God's love makes on us. At the end of the poem, Love says to the soul “You must sit down and taste my meat” and eventually, every objection overcome, the soul does sit and eat. The poem ends here, but this is where the adventure really begins. It's only once we sit at the table of God that we discover what's really on the menu.

One thing that is certainly on offer is the chance to become ourselves. By that I mean to become the people that God intended us to be and knows that we can be if we allow him to transform us. Transformation is a word with disturbing connotations. We tend to think in terms of Dr. Who regenerating and being completely unrecognisable, but that's not what God offers us. Part of the pay off of a true relationship with God is a true relationship with ourselves. The same tradition that has encouraged us to view ourselves as unworthy guests of God, struggling in Lent to dig out our faults has led us up a blind alley, in which all spiritual journeying is expected to be characterised by an inner fight against sin and temptation. In a wonderful little book called “Silence and honey cakes”, Rowan Williams has this to say.

*Perhaps part of the problem is that modern readers in particular are a bit inclined to romanticize struggle and tension. At least since Kant in the eighteenth century, there is a feeling that **really** good deeds are the ones we do with the most effort, after the biggest struggles; so our moral thinking has concentrated on the difficulties of decision-making more than on the character that develops over a lifetime. But if we think of those people whose moral and spiritual integrity has mattered to us and made a difference to us, we shall normally find that they are the ones whose behaviour doesn't draw attention to how difficult it all is, how hard they're working to be good; they are people for whom, to some extent, there is a “naturalness” about what they do. They have become a particular type of **person**; and that personal reality has begun to change the human nature they live in and to make slightly different things the object of desire.... Jesus, because as a person he is one with the word of God, in perfect communion with the Father, changes human*

*nature by his personal loving surrender to God in every detail of his life and death. Those who live in him by grace are in the process of having **their** human nature changed as their personal relation with him develops: they are growing into what is always fully present and accomplished in him. Human nature as transformed by his divine freedom is becoming, as we might say, “second nature” to them.*

So our transformation is only transformation into ourselves – our true selves – not into an alien creature that nobody will recognise. We have nothing to fear by accepting God's invitation to sit and eat. So what next?

We began by asking what the purpose might be of our Lenten observations. I hope that by now we might consider the possibility that the purpose behind what we do in Lent – as indeed what we do at any other time – is to move us closer to God. However we mark Lent, whether by giving things up or by taking things on or by giving things away to charity or whatever, we could try to give up also the idea that by doing any of these things we're making ourselves more worthy of God's love. Nothing we can do will manage that and we don't even need to try because it's a free gift that's ours for the asking. Putting things we enjoy to one side for a while is only useful if we use the time without those things to turn our attention to God and to wait for him to fill the space they leave. It's back to the fasting *and prayer* idea. Lent can be an endurance test as we prove to ourselves that we really can do without red wine or chocolate or TV for 6 weeks. I'm not saying that's a bad thing, any more than pushing ourselves to complete a long walk or a work out is bad, but Lent is about much more than testing our limits. It's about opening ourselves up to the limitless love of God and accepting his invitation to know him.

At the end of this afternoon, at 6 o'clock, there is the opportunity for all of us to share in the greatest love feast anyone could be offered – the Eucharist. If ever we needed confirmation that God asks no more of us than our love and our willingness to be transformed by him, we have it in this sacrament. Whatever our Eucharistic theology, we recognise this as a sacred space, a holy moment of deep and close encounter with God. When the God who is love says in Herbert's poem “You must sit down and taste my meat”, the meat on the menu is God himself, giving himself for the life of the world and for us as individuals.

In our last period of silence, we might like to think of it as a time of preparation for welcoming God and receiving him in the Eucharist. For those of us who stay this evening, that time will come fairly soon. But for all of us there will be a next time. We could ask ourselves if we are willing to be as gracious as guests as God is as our host. Are we prepared to stop turning God's love away, protesting our own unworthiness and accept the love God offers us freely? (For those of us who are not communicants, there is still the moment of encounter, the time to abandon excuses and allow God to draw us in. It won't happen unless we let it. We're drawn in, not dragged). The love of God is immense, vast, overwhelming. It's easy to lose sight of its intimacy while being overawed by its greatness. Nevertheless, intimacy is what God desires with each of us. So let's be ready to welcome Love itself, even to address God as “my Love” sometimes, and not always “my Lord”. This is part of a love feast that God has spent eternity preparing for us. Can we bring ourselves to look beyond our failures and accept it with joy and unreserved gratitude?

Closing Prayer

Lord and love of our life, we thank you for your invitation, your welcome and your gift of yourself. We pray for grace and courage to give up those things which blind us to your love, to take on those things which will make your love known to the world you made and to rejoice that you invite us to sit and eat with you. May we be gracious, joyful and courageous guests at your table, open to the transforming power of your eternal love. In Jesus name we pray. Amen