

United Benefice of Old Brampton and Great Barlow

Fr Stanley Monkhouse Sermon Archive

Year B – Trinity

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Trinity Sunday

One of the themes of Trinity Sunday is *images of God*.

Many of us are brought up to see the Lord as a kind of irascible headmaster who needs constant appeasement. Some of us think of the Lord as a judge, or a lover, or a teacher, or an indulgent daddy, or ... the list is endless. Interestingly, researchers have found that on the whole the people who tend to see the Lord as a judge are those who are quick to judge. Those who tend to see the Lord as a teacher are teachers. Those who tend to see the Lord as an indulgent daddy are indulgent daddies ... and so on. We have a tendency to make the lord in our own image. Trinity Sunday pulls us up sharp about this. In the OT lesson we have a picture of the Divine as a Lord-of-the-Rings type fantastic creature. Nothing like any of us. Nothing like anything we've seen.

The doctrine of the trinity is only hinted at in Holy Scripture but the elements are there:

- Creator of the universe – father
- Emissary to earth to show us how to live – son
- Inspirer to continue this after the ascension – spirit

The image of God as Trinity is impossible to grasp in its fullness. At All-Age services, we might take water, ice and steam as three versions of the same thing. Or we might talk of a three-sided mountain. These are only approximations, but they'll do for the moment. If you've read *The Shack* (and if you haven't you should) the Father appears in that sometimes as a woman and sometimes as a man (gender is irrelevant to the Divine), the Son as a middle-aged man in a plaid shirt, and the spirit as a somewhat insubstantial Asian woman you can see through and sense rather than feel or touch.

God is love, we're told, and theologians talk of three 'persons' of mutual love. We've been hearing quite a lot from John's Gospel recently, in which Father and Son/Word create and exist together before creation. After the Ascension, Father gives the world the Spirit, in place of Jesus. John describes the three components of the trinity existing and interacting within love.

If you find this difficult, join the club and never mind. Trinity Sunday reminds us that our human notions of the infinite and divine are inadequate. Let's just leave it at that. After all, we accept our inability to know what happened at the big bang. We accept our ignorance of the fact that we don't know exactly how electricity works (what exactly does it do to electrons in the outer ring of the atoms of the conductor metal?). We accept that we do not know what happens in the smallest particles of which we are made, or biological processes ...

What we can do is respect the Divine lord (or fear him in Biblical language), and we can try and align our wills with his. We are all made in God's image, we all have a bit of God inside us. All we have to do is stop resisting that God-within, and let the God-within expand to fill our skins from the inside. At a time like this in our national and personal lives, this message has some resonance: forget the evil advertising industry that tells us that consumption is the cure-all for our ills. It isn't. Like Nicodemus, we need to accept that a new start is necessary (being born again in Gospel language), a shedding of old attitudes, and a realisation that we are not in control. We need to trust ourselves into the hands of the Divine. Jesus said, my yoke is easy and my burden is light. This doesn't mean we pick up an extra burden that he lays upon us—it means we set down the burden of consumerism and consumption and then walk on our way lighter, trusting in the Lord. That seems as if there is hardly any burden at all—and maybe there isn't.

The important thing is not how the Trinity works, but just that it does. Today's readings tell us that we may be unworthy (Old Testament Isaiah lesson), but that the spirit makes us worthy. The Gospel tells us (God so loved the world etc) that Jesus came to us to show the way. God became human so that we might become divine. After all, the Christmas Gospel (In the beginning was the word ...) tells us that we have the power to become sons and daughters of God by following in his steps. The 'being born again' of Nicodemus is a rebirth into trust rather than certainty. Trust the complexity and the multifaceted Holy, Blessed and Glorious Trinity.

A very happy Trinity Sunday to you all.

Harvest 2007 Carsington

What can I possibly say about Harvest that is new? This might be the first Harvest sermon I've preached, but I would be deluding myself if I thought that it was the first one you'd listened to – or slept to. So I will be brief.

It all seems to me to hinge on the doctrine of creation.

In the beginning was the Word – logos, God. Word was both with God, and was God. If you read Proverbs 8:22 you will find that in that book, present with God at creation, and the substance out of which the cosmos is made, is sofia. Wisdom.

There is confusion here, then, between God – and the material that God uses to fashion the cosmos. And there are essentially two ways of thinking about this.

- The first is to say that God created the world from nothing – ex nihilo
 - The second is to say that God created the world from Godself.
- God created the world from Godself. And God is love. The world is created out of love. Word, logos and wisdom, sofia are aspects of love. Jesus is God, God is love, so Jesus is love. The human Jesus is personified love.

Psalm 104 O Lord, how manifold are thy works: in wisdom hast thou made them all; the earth is full of thy riches.

Psalm 24 The earth is the Lord's and all that therein is

It is a perverted reading of Genesis that thinks that it gives humanity permission to rape the earth and the earth's creatures. The proper reading is that humanity is given the duty and privilege to care for the cosmos. The cosmos is part of God, created of and by God. So clearly our duty to care for the cosmos and properly husband its resources is a theological duty. That is what farmers and gardeners and those who look after animals do.

At Harvest this is exactly what we celebrate: proper care for the fruits of creation will sustain us. And the fruits of creation means looking after the earth responsibly, with an eye to the future. If we had had an eye for the future, and learnt the lessons of the past, and if we had not been overcome by greed, then BSE might not have happened.

But there is more to harvest than agriculture and animal welfare.

Tending the fruits of creation is also a personal matter. Intellectual searching is creative. The arts are creative. Scientific research can be creative. All human endeavour can be creative. And it is a theological duty for each of us to engage in these pursuits in ways that might be most expedient for us – as befits our skills and enthusiasms. We need wisdom with which the cosmos is imbued in order to sift the desirable ways of doing things from the undesirable.

Talents parable says yes to creation

And if we want to plug into this wisdom we might remember that our souls need gardening to. You might remember that according to John our risen Lord was mistaken by Mary Magdalene for the gardener: not surprisingly considering that it was scarcely day and she was in a garden in spring.

For in a sense, and a good sense, Christ may well be said to be a gardener, and indeed is one. For our rule is, Christ as He appears, so He is ever; no false semblant in Him. ... And ever since it is He That as God makes all our gardens green, sends us yearly the spring, and all the herbs and flowers we then gather; and neither Paul with his planting, nor Apollos with his watering, could do any good without Him. So a gardener in that sense. But not in that alone; but He it is who gardens our 'souls' too, and makes them, as the prophet [Jeremiah] saith, like a well-watered garden;' weeds out of them whatsoever is noisome or unsavoury, sows and plants them with true roots and seeds of righteousness, waters them with the dew of His grace, and makes them bring forth fruit to eternal life.

But it is none of all these, but besides all these, no over and above all these, this day if ever, most properly He was a gardener. Was one, and so after a more peculiar manner might take this likeness on Him. Christ rising was indeed a gardener, and that a strange one, Who made such a herb grow out of the ground this day as the like was never seen before, a dead body to shoot forth alive out of the grave.

From his body issued the resurrection. From the earth issues the resurrection. From our creativity issues the resurrection, day by day, moment by moment.

Sisters and brothers, we are right to celebrate Harvest. Every day is a harvest and all biological creativity is harvest. The resurrection is a harvest, and every harvest is a resurrection.

B Proper 10, Trinity 5, 2009

Old Testament: Amos 7: 7-15

Psalm 85.

Epistle: Ephesians 1: 3-14

Gospel: Mark 6: 14-29

Yesterday, Clare Short, Afghanistan, because TB wanted to be liked s much he could not say no to requests from important people. Even when his guts were telling him otherwise.

Gospel, Herod, explain it.

Gospel: JB not welcomed, decapitated.

Why: because he told the truth and that niggled away in Herod's mind. because Herod cared more about keeping other people happy than doing what his inner self told him was right.

OT lesson: Amos: not welcomed. cows, fat cows.

Go away, he's told, Amaziah

don't disturb our complacency. don't confuse the issue with facts

And now, he tells us that the YHWH has a measure, a standard, for the world

So what is prophecy:

is it telling the future in a magical kind of way

is it looking at the present and saying that such and such will happen

is it analyzing the trends of the present and saying that these are the things that might happen

What would happen if there were prophets in the church?

it is a saying what comes from within, without worrying about how your remarks will be taken. It is a fearlessness about what others will think, or how they will react.

It is not letting what others might do influence what you have to say

And what you have to say, and do, is not about self-interest.

we need prophets now

- people who expose the lies told in about standards in education – if they matter
- people who expose the lies told about access to NHS services
- foreign aid
- people who point out the way in which the rich can buy clever lawyers that are unavailable to the poor
- all exactly the same issues that bothered Amos and his fellow prophets
- church: bishops

prophets make us uncomfortable because they tell us what needs attention in ourselves – and on society

- they ask painful and unsettling questions, they take away the obstacles that prevent us from getting to the heart of the matter.
- they away the illusory mask of the manipulative world to show what the true situation is, in order to lead people towards hope.
- They encourage us to *explore* of the new territory in myself and to articulate my discoveries as a service to others.

Why do we resist prophets, like Amaziah and like Herod?

It's to try and hang on to the present. Not willing to let go and see what happens. Trying to control the future. Buying security.

Doing things that something tells us maybe we shouldn't, but we keep on anyway.
That niggles away in the mind

We have an example of how to do this, in Jesus Christ

Epistle

Mercy and truth are met together

Mary Magnificat

Some words that he says, again and again

forgive, don't be afraid, make good use of what is given to you

End of gospel: they took JB's body and laid it in the tomb
tomb, memory, mnema, mnemonic, memorial

But the message of the resurrection is that the tomb is opened, so the memories fly away.
The memories stop limiting us and tying us to he past.

Dementias, we get stuck in the past

Almost as if we find our hearts enclosed in shell

Letting your heart out, break the shell, let the heart hatch by chipping through the shell

Having courage to let yourself be taken where

Trinity 6

I wonder what sort of image of God you have?

Perhaps Father, Inspirer, Creator, Comforter, Guide. Perhaps like David Jenkins, the former Bishop of Durham, God is a Disturber. God certainly has disturbed me, propelling me from one country to another and from one job to another. That's some disturbance.

Whatever image you have – and this is an interesting topic for another day – I suggest one more image this morning, that of a mischievous practical joker. And here's why.

For the last 30 years I have been accustomed to talking about bodily functions and organs in the most intimate and detailed manner you can imagine. My last teaching session to medical students about 4 weeks ago was all about what can go wrong during development with the genital organs of a baby boy, and you might think that becoming a member of the clergy would mean I'd leave all that behind. Not a bit of it. The first sermon I preach in Wirksworth church is on a day where in the epistle circumcision looms large. That either signifies a mischievous Rector arranging the rota, or a mischievous God. I will plump for the latter.

Paul uses circumcision of course as the mark of belonging to a tribe or ethnic group, and the point he makes is that the message of Jesus is that it does not matter whether you are circumcised or not – in the new creation, those days are over. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, male nor female, we are all one. What this says to us about openness to others and acceptance of others, and about welcoming others is material for another sermon, but I certainly want to mention it in passing today.

Thinking about this genital theme last week - Why hadn't I seen this earlier – I was stunned to realise just how comfortable the writers of Holy Scripture are about genital references, and they expected their readers also to be. Compare this with how prudish and voyeuristic and intolerant many people are today. We can learn a thing or two from Holy Scripture. And then I looked for other references in Holy Scripture to parts of the anatomy. There are millions. Skulls, hearts, limbs, bones, skin, bellies, bowels, internal organs. And we must not forget that Luke describes the son of God developing in Mary's abdomen.

The whole point of Christianity is that God became human, like us. Incarnation. Enfleshment. Incarnation happened at the moment of Jesus' conception. The womb of Mary sustained the growing Son of God during Mary's pregnancy. The Bishop yesterday likened the church as the womb in which we mature in faith.

The light of Christ growing inside us from the moment of our conception. All we have to do is cooperate with it and not prevent its shining out. Let your light so shine

We have been divinized by the incarnation.

All human bodily anatomy and physiology, too, are divinized, cleansed.

Now lest you think this is some crazy notion I am spouting, let me tell you that it comes in part from the implications of Holy Scripture (Proverbs, John), and partly from the early church teachings of the holy men of what is now Syria and Turkey. They have a lovely image, one to which I will return again and again because it is a favourite image of mine – that we are all created from God, we are bits of God. We all have God within us – and it is to God we mystically return in due course.

Cranmer: that we may live in him and he in us.

We all make up the mystical body of Christ.

And of course, we refresh ourselves, and remind ourselves in taking the Body of Christ in the Eucharist.

Today's gospel tells us that bodies are important. The sick sought healing through touch – Jesus' garment in this story, Jesus himself in other stories.

Touch is important. It is by touch that we are healed.

Touch is physical. We need not be ashamed of our physical nature.

Remember that we perceive God, through our physical sense organs

We Hear God: listening for God, listening to music that moves and tells us of God

We See God: in others, in art and beauty that reveals God through creativity.

We feel the presence of God: low notes of a cathedral organ, the rhythmic beat, the touch of others, the touch of God's creation

We smell and taste the presence of God: the creativity of good food and wine – a very Dominican idea!

All this is prayer. We pray with our bodies as well as our minds. The grace and beauty of the athlete is a revelation of God. It is prayer if directed God-wards as much as singing hymns. We worship with our bodies as well as our minds. Look at the athleticism of Muslims at prayer, kneeling, prostration, standing. We could do with more of that physicality of worship and prayer.

Worship through dancing: why not? Some make the sign of the cross, physical touches.

We perform these physical acts in worship not *because* we believe but *so that we might* believe.

The third theme I want to draw out of the readings today is the Master's instruction to his tired and hard-pressed disciples to recharge their batteries by going into a solitary place.

We need to take such breaks

To think about God and us

To talk about God and us

To do things about God and us

To listen to God

To reconnect with the divine spark within, with the light of Christ within.

Such retreats are not to shun the physical world but rather to fortify ourselves the better to engage refreshed with the physical world.

The first great commandment demands that we love God with all our heart and mind and soul and strength. The Greek word means more than just strength, but wholeness and integrity of bodily function

To do this we need to look after ourselves in body and mind.

You might think this is selfish

But it is not at all. The second great commandment to love our neighbour as ourselves demands that we first love ourselves. It does not say we must love our neighbour better than ourselves. It makes me angry to see how so often the message that comes across from church people is perverted in an attempt to manipulate us into feeling guilty.

Aeroplane oxygen masks – get yourself sorted out before helping others.

The fact is that we are no use to anyone, and certainly not to God, unless we are in good form ourselves. We have a Christian duty to take care of ourselves.

We have a Christian duty to seek adequate rest and recuperation: would that the captains of industry who insist on making slaves of their workforce would heed this.

More about this – wing it for a few seconds.

So here are the three messages of my first sermon in Wirksworth parish church.

Do not be ashamed of the biology you carry around with you
use it to glorify the creator God as well as you can given the ravages of time and infirmity permit.

Rejoice in it, and the creativity, grace and joy it brings.

And remember that you have a Christian duty to look after yourself, to rest, and to allow others to rest.

Jesus the Christ was fully human – that is part of our faith.

We most approach his example when we too are fully and gloriously and authentically human.

Amen

Trinity 7

Year B, Proper 12, 2009

OB only

2 Kings 4: 42-44
Ps 145: 10-19
Ephesians 3: 14-21
John 6: 1-21

That story, the feeding of the five thousand, is well known. Scholars argue whether it is factual, or merely symbolic, but I find myself not overly bothered: its power is symbolic whether or not it is factual. We have:

- Christ the distributor of bread to the hungry, that is to say, the bread of life, spiritual food.
- The fish representing the fruits of God's creation, gathered by the labour of the disciples, and so the labour of our hands.
- The crossing of the lake to the other side, gentile, side tells us that the word of Christ is for all us sinners, not just the respectable churchgoers.
- And it is there for the whole world, represented by the five thousand, special significance of five in Biblical numerology.
- In all this. the allusion to the Eucharist is clear enough (takes the loaves, gives thanks, breaks them, distributes them).
- The richness, the prodigality, of divine gifts.
- Do not be afraid! Jesus' most oft-heard words.

But it is none of these that I want to reflect on this morning. Neither is it telling you that Susan and I have been to that place. January 2008, the green hillside at the north end of the Sea of Galilee, near the site of Capernaum. Not all this, though that is itself interesting, and I have nice pics I could show you.

No – none of that, but a minor detail that engages me today. This story is much the same in all four gospels, except for one small detail you heard this morning, only in John's Gospel. Only John tells us that the five loaves and two small fish are provided by a *paidarion*, the Greek for child or young servant. Yes: the bread of life comes from the hands of a child. Why is it there in John, when the other writers don't mention it?

It conjures up some resonances!

- A little child shall lead them (Isaiah 11.6).
- Allow the children to come to me.
- If anyone hurts a child, it would be better for that person to be thrown into the water with a stone around his neck.
- To enter the kingdom of heaven you must be as a child.

What is it about children that is so important to salvation? Here are some characteristics:

- straightforward
- trusting
- direct, unhampered by so-called politeness and 'good manners'
- push at boundaries to explore (Quaker)
- full of energy

The openness and open-mindedness of children puts me in mind of one of my favourite images of what we seek: enlightenment, freedom from ignorance. Such freedom comes from being fully aware of what exactly is going on in and around us, with open eyes and minds: mindfulness.

This is a difficult thing for us adults to aspire to. The 'freshness' of the child within us has been obscured by accretions of 'adulthood' that gather around the core. Layers that come from pride, wilfulness, selfishness, thoughtlessness, self-deception, pretence, puffed-upness. We tell ourselves that we need these things to get on in life, to crawl up the greasy career pole, to please other people. I know – I've been there. All these things mar the image of innocence within – innocence, I mean what the word means: lacking in harm. Not naive, not unsophisticated, but simply lacking in harm.

Our hearts are hardened by life. Scarred. Solidified. Frozen in ice. All encasing that innocence, that straightforwardness within.

Let's strip away these casings. Let the warmth in. Warmth of the sun, warmth of the son. Light brings warmth.

Self-examination is about letting the light, the warmth, into your soul. Getting to know myself means peeling away the thick skins that have grown up around the divine core within, childlike free from pretence.

Later in this liturgy we will each of us have a personal interview with the Lord, in the Holy Sacrament. What will he see? He is love, so why be afraid? Maybe we are not so much afraid as ashamed. If God is love, and love is God, we don't need to be ashamed. Are we afraid that by letting someone into our lives we are in some way diminished? Not so, said the Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI at his inauguration: 'Do not be afraid of Christ! He takes nothing away, and he gives you everything. When we give ourselves to him, we receive a hundredfold in return.'

Let the warmth in. Warmth hatches chicks. We need hatching of our hearts. Or, if you prefer the frozen-heart analogy, our hearts melt in the warmth. Strangely warmed, as John Wesley said. Warm the shell of grumpy self preoccupation until it breaks, and we see the world again through child-like eyes.

Hatching of the heart is not going to happen until we pause, rest, are still – to let it happen.

I sent RR14 to the usual crowd earlier this week, including Hugh in Texas, who wrote back:

hi dad read rr14. v good. ... i think we have lost the ability to balance. our equilibrium is off. ... i can't remember the last time i witnessed somebody making a good balanced unbiased decision. ... i think the phrase godly righteous and sober life is the thing, sober is the way forward, well considered thought out and balanced. ... the email doesn't even come close to saying what it was supposed to, but when you get started its hard to stay on point which i think was about listening. inner peace - it is in the listening that i heal. the problem is that the noise is deafening.

It makes one proud to be a dad.

Listening to the quiet, letting the heart be warmed and hatched in the light of Christ, is a daily discipline. Listening in silence is prayer. There are other ways of hatching too: coming to church is hatching with others - battery hatching, if you like! Journal writing, or walking, are other ways. Acts of compassion, or social protest are other ways.

What ever ways you choose, attend to your heart. Listen to others. Be quiet and listen to yourself.

Let me tell you a story.

Once upon a time ...

The Snow Queen.

Kay and Gerda reunited. Wholeness restored.

Tears of love melting the heart of ice so that we attain eternity.

O my Saviour, lifted
from the earth for me,
draw me, in thy mercy,
nearer unto thee.

**Speed these lagging footsteps,
melt this heart of ice
as I scan the marvels
of thy sacrifice.**

Lift my earth-bound longings,
fix them, Lord, above;
draw me with the magnet
of thy mighty love.

Lord, thine arms are stretching
ever far and wide,

to enfold thy children
to thy loving side.

And I come, O Jesus:
dare I turn away?
No, thy love hath conquered,
and I come today,

bringing all my burdens,
sorrow, sin, and care;
at thy feet I lay them,
and I leave them there.

William Walsham How (1823-1897)

The verse in bold is absent in all English hymn books. But it is there in the Church of Ireland book. It is there in the original. It is magical.

Trinity 7 AMMP, HC

The feeding of the five thousand, today's gospel, is a very well known story. Scholars argue whether it is historical, or merely symbolic, but I find myself not overly bothered about this: for me its power is enhanced if it is regarded as symbolic rather than historical. We have

- Christ the distributor of bread to the hungry, that is to say, the bread of life.
- The fish representing the fruits of God's creation, gathered by the labour of the disciples, and so the labour of our hands.
- The crossing of the lake to the other, gentile, side tells us that the word of Christ is for all us sinners, not just the respectable churchgoers.
- And it is there for the whole world, represented by the five thousand, special significance of five in Biblical numerology.
- In all this. the allusion to the eucharist is clear enough (takes the loaves, gives thanks and distributes them).

But it is none of these that I want to reflect on this morning, though all are worth it. It is a minor detail that caught my eye. This story is told by all four gospel writers, but only John tells us that the five loaves and two small fish are provided by a, the Greek for child or young slave. Yes: the bread of life comes from the hands of a little child. This is a stunning detail as far as I'm concerned, and one that hits me all the more forcefully after a week in which I've been involved in the Holiday Club and seen children in action.

What resonances this conjures up!

- A little child shall lead them (Isaiah 11.6).
- Allow the children to come to me.
- If anyone hurts a child, it would be better for that person to be thrown into the water with a stone around his neck.
- To enter the kingdom of heaven you must be as a child

What is it about children that is so important to salvation?

- Straightforward
- Trusting
- Direct, unhampered by so-called politeness and 'good manners'
- Pushing at boundaries to see how far they can go
- Full of energy

The openness and open-mindedness of children puts me in mind of one of my favourite images of salvation: enlightenment, freedom from ignorance. Such freedom comes from being fully aware of what exactly is going on in and around us, with open eyes and minds: nonjudgmental mindfulness.

But this is a difficult thing for us adults to aspire to. The 'freshness' of the child within us has been obscured by the accretions of 'adulthood' that gather around the core. Layers that come from pride, wilfulness, selfishness, thoughtlessness, self-deception, pretence, puffed-upness. We tell ourselves

that some of these are necessary to get on in life, to crawl up the greasy career pole, to please other people. I know – I've been there. All these things that prevent us from living the life that is within us.

To give a medical analogy, think what happens when we are wounded. The wound heals by scarring, and scar tissue is thick and ugly. So as we go through life with its hurts – we are hurt by others and we hurt ourselves, the resultant scar tissue obscures the inner core. It clouds our view of the world, and it prevents others from seeing what we are truly like. We end up like one of those Russian dolls with so many layers obscuring the essential core.

I suggest our journey towards salvation is one in which we need strip away these layers, to approach the core within, to recover our core of child-likeness. I am suggesting, like the Fathers of the Church of the first three centuries (before Augustine) that the core within is divine, part of God implanted within us all. All we have to do is cooperate with it once we recognise it – a capacity that we had when we were born, I suggest, but one that is progressively lost to us.

So the question is, how do we get rid of all the rubbish that obscures the divine core? Well, of course, this is the difficult thing. A good place to start is by self examination, by trying to see ourselves as others see us. You might try imagining yourself on a cloud looking down at you and noting what you see. One of the best ways to go about this sort of task is to open our hearts to someone whom we trust absolutely.

You might say that such self-examination is about letting the light of Christ shine into your soul. Well, brothers and sisters, I can tell you that when the searchlight illuminates what is in mine, I see some unpleasant creatures wriggling about. It may be that you are altogether better people than I am, with only pure whiteness within, but looking around, I doubt that. In myself I've seen pride and selfishness masquerading as necessity or pragmatism. I've convinced myself that rearrangement of my prejudices is radical thought. And I don't think I'm alone: listen to the first letter of John:

But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.

Getting to know myself means peeling away the thick skins that have grown up around the divine core within, childlike free from pretence.

These enemies within are more dangerous than any external enemy because they inhibit my goodness. I am told to love my enemies, and these are my enemies. But first I must identify them, and then I can embrace them, and watch them shrivel up.

So the challenge for all of us is to confront our demons inside in the hope that the light of Christ will bleach them. Demons, as Baron von Hügel says,
that are enemies of our good selves
only so fighting are we adult fruitful happy

Then I need to accept my own failure, and forgive myself. Christianity teaches that when I accept the forgiveness offered in Christ, it does not affect me alone – it affects all those with whom I come in contact because it changes the way I relate to everyone. Christ's forgiveness is salvation. I have to be forgiven to help save others. Why is it so difficult to accept forgiveness and divine love? Are we afraid that by letting someone into our lives we are in some way diminished? Not so, said the Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI at his inauguration last year: 'Do not be afraid of Christ! He takes nothing away, and he gives you everything. When we give ourselves to him, we receive a hundredfold in return.'

Let's remember some images from Holy Scripture

- We are made in the image of God.
- We can polish that image to reflect Christ.
- The kingdom of God is within you.
- 1 John 3 2-3: when he is revealed we will be like him, we will see him as he is. And we who have this hope must purify ourselves.

What better purification agent than the light of Christ.

SO, sisters and brothers, thus we can try and recover our childlikeness, and gain access to our inner core, approaching the image of God within. This will help us to see – and now we get to the message of the first reading from Ephesians – that Christ does indeed dwell in our hearts, that the Holy Spirit strengthens the inner core, allowing our light to shine forth to the world, unobscured by layers of grime and dirt. We cooperate with the Holy Trinity, FSS, so that, in the words of Thomas Cranmer's Prayer of Humble Access, he may evermore dwell in us and we in him.

End here at Elton

Let us remember this lovely and reassuring grace, given with no strings attached, as we approach the altar at Communion.

George Herbert knew what he was talking about:

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,
 Guiltie of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed 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 unkinde, ungratefull? Ah my deare,
 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, sayes Love, and taste my meat:
 So I did sit and eat.

Amen

Trinity 9

Trinity 9. Proper 14, 9 August 2009
S Lawrence the Martyr (transferred)

CHANGE FIRST HYMN

LAWRENCE GOSPEL

- Ephesians 4: 25-5:2.
- Psalm 34: 1-8. O taste and see ...
- Gospel: John 6: 35, 41-51.
- Gospel for S Lawrence: Matthew 6: 19-24.

A fantasia on faces, images.

Last Thursday was the Feast of the Transfiguration. Tomorrow is the Feast of S Lawrence, the Barlow Carnival connexion.

Transfiguration. Mountain top, clouds, glory. Moses and Elijah, the law and the prophets brought into the present with Jesus and the disciples, the interconnectedness of time, the real sense that memories bring the past into the present. Zikkaron. Sacraments. Old people. Time annihilated. Timelessness.

Then we have Jesus with his face *shining*.

Faces that we present to the world. Is our face a shining face, a radiant face, an authentic face? A face that reflects what is going on inside? Is it a face that is a means of communication with the outside world. Facial muscles are called *mimetic* muscles because they *mimic* our emotions.

Or is our a face a pretence, covered by a mask

—*persona*? Is it a face that hides the real self, a barrier between ourselves and others? Face not as a means of communication, but face as barrier.

A face that is uncovered lets the real me shine out to the world: *let your light so shine ...* A face that is uncovered allows me to see more clearly. An uncovered face that allows me to see the truth, and allows others to see the true me. The radiant face of someone who is utterly at peace with themselves. A face that speaks the truth.

Epistle: speak the truth. Not evasions, not pretending that all is well when it is not. When we do this there are consequences that we don't want. Not covering our faces. Bankers, Politicians. Advertising industry. Liars, Deceit, Cheating. Charm. Saving face.

Speaking the truth is expensive: it can cost one dear in terms of consequences. It can cost friendships. But if it does, maybe they were not worth having. Speaking the truth can cost me my life: Romero, martyrs of the Nazis, the Communists. Martin Luther King.

St Lawrence: spoke the truth and took the consequences. Speaking the truth, and being one's true self, exposing one's innermost thoughts and fears is exhausting. It can break one. In Lawrence's brokenness, his martyrdom, he is remembered.

Two weeks ago we read St John's feeding of the five thousand, and today we have Jesus telling his followers that he is the bread of life. This is effectively John's account of the beginning of the Eucharist. In the brokenness of the bread, Jesus is remembered. Jesus breaking the bread to expose its substance. Jesus allowing himself to be exposed, broken, crucified.

In the mass we break open the word. In the mass we break open the bread. In the mass we break open the body. In my life as a parish priest I hear of other people's brokenness. If my response is to be authentic, I am wrung out, broken, at a loss to know what to do. Powerless to deal with lonely people who have lost the love of their lives, their companions, their soul friends. Powerless to deal with grief, anger, shame and guilt.

Jesus teaches us to share ourselves with the world, to expose ourselves to the world, not holding back. Open to being broken.

When we take HC we have what amounts to a personal interview with the Lord. What does the Lord see? Do we put on a mask of pretence, covering ourselves up with spiritual cosmetics, pretending that all is well? Trying to justify to ourselves the baser aspects of our nature? How can we ever be healed unless we acknowledge we are ill?

I am so troubled by past mistakes, blindnesses, feeblenesses etc. Incapacitated by shame at my foolishness. I sometimes feel that it's at these moments when I am confronted by the truth of my past self-deceptions that I am ushered into the divine presence.

This is purgatory, here and now; the place where I have my mask (persona) removed. And the final dreadful, awful moment comes when I see myself in a mirror exactly as the divine has seen me all along and I can not bear the sight. When I see that the reasons I did things that I thought were for the good of others were actually selfishness dressed up as altruism. In that moment I am in the fire, in the presence of God. Like Newman's Gerontius I can not bear the sight and call out:

*Take me away, and in the lowest deep
There let me be,
And there in hope the lone night-watches keep, Told out for me.*

When we see ourselves as God sees us, we judge ourselves. It is shocking. It is exhausting.

But there is hope.

A man that looks on glass on it may stay his eye, or if he pleaseth through it pass and then the heavens espy.

I am forged by the fire into gold. The Elixir.

This is the famous stone that turneth all to gold: For that which God doth touch and own cannot for lesse be told.

And then I see the reflection of God. The glass is not see-through glass, but a mirror in which I see myself as God sees me. Then I become the image of God, cleansed by the fire.

Name of the Rose. Mirror. Imago Dei. Secretum. Holy of holies.

As we receive Christ's body in our hands we are putting ourselves in his hands to be broken by him, to be snapped out of what we think we are, where we think we belong, who we want to call ourselves. One day I will tell you how three years of ordained ministry have changed me. Susan will tell you how after I have opened my heart to you in Sunday sermons—and I do—I am drained and exhausted and fit for nothing on a Monday.

Laurence the martyr. In some way we are all called to be martyrs. Let our martyrdom be speaking the truth in spiritual nakedness before the Lord. Remember the Transfiguration. Remember Lawrence. Remember the broken body.

God bless this mess.

Trinity 10

Proper 15, Trinity 10, 2009

- Joy and delight of being human at Barlow carnival.
- Joy and delight of being human at the wedding. Wedding at Cana, water into wine, new life. The place where Mary was the first person to intercede with Jesus on behalf of humanity. Mary whose feast day it was yesterday in the western church.
- But there's a down side to human nature: Baby P's mother in whom we see a most extreme manifestation of something that we all possess: the ability to ignore the needs of others through our own selfishness. Yes, we all have them, and maybe, just maybe, that woman allowed them to grow unchecked to a degree that we can call evil, even inhuman.
- But the seeds of evil are within us all, as Paul well knew when he reminded us, as he often did, to be on his guard: For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.
- The high places in our minds that we fool ourselves are palaces of light.
- Wisdom vs folly. The pursuit of wisdom. Resisting seduction by folly, by falseness, by emptiness, by vanity (futility, emptiness).

Once upon a time there lived an emperor, who thought so much of new clothes that he spent all his money on them; his only ambition was to be always well dressed. He had a coat for every hour

of the day; and he cared for nothing else.

One day two swindlers came to his city; they made people believe that they were weavers, and declared they could manufacture the finest cloth to be imagined. Their colours and patterns, they said, were not only exceptionally beautiful, but the clothes made of their material possessed the wonderful quality of being invisible to anyone who was unfit for their job or unpardonably stupid.

"That must be wonderful," thought the emperor. "If I had a suit made of this I should be able to find out who was unfit for their places, and who I could dismiss." And he gave a large sum of money to the swindlers, in advance, so that they should set to work without delay. They set up two looms, and pretended to be very hard at work, but they did nothing whatever on the looms. They asked for the finest silk and the most precious gold-cloth; but they stole this for themselves, and worked at the empty looms.

"I should very much like to know how they are getting on," thought the emperor. But he felt rather uneasy when he remembered that he who was not fit for his office could not see it. Personally, he was of opinion that he had nothing to fear, yet he thought it advisable to send somebody else first to see how matters stood.

The Emperor's minister went to see the swindlers. "Heaven preserve us!" he thought, "I cannot see anything at all," but he did not say so. "Oh dear," he thought, "can I be so stupid? I should never have thought so, and nobody must know it! Is it possible that I am not fit for my office? No, no, I cannot say that I was unable to see the cloth."

"So, what do you think?" said one of the swindlers, pretending to be busily weaving.

"Oh, very beautiful," replied the old minister looking through his glasses. "What brilliant colours! I shall tell the emperor that I like the cloth very much."

"We are pleased to hear that," said the two weavers, and described to him the colours and explained the curious pattern. The old minister listened attentively, so he could tell the emperor what they said.

The swindlers asked for more money, silk and gold-cloth. But they kept everything for themselves, and not a thread came near the loom, but they continued to work at the empty looms. From time to time the emperor sent others to check on progress, but it was as before.

At last the emperor wished to see it himself, while it was still on the loom. With a number of courtiers, including the two who had already been there, he went to the two clever swindlers, who now worked as hard as they could, but without using any thread.

"Is it not magnificent?" said the two old statesmen who had been there before. "Your Majesty must admire the colours and the pattern." And then they pointed to the empty looms, for they imagined the others could see the cloth.

"Good grief" thought the emperor, "I do not see anything at all. That is terrible! Am I stupid? Am I unfit to be emperor? That would indeed be dreadful."

"Really," he said, turning to the weavers, "your cloth has our most gracious approval;" and nodding contentedly he looked at the empty loom, for he did not like to say that he saw nothing. All his attendants advised him to wear the new clothes at a great procession soon to take place.

The night before the procession, the swindlers pretended to finish the garment, and said at last: "The emperor's new suit is ready now." The emperor and all his barons came to the hall; the swindlers held their arms up as if they held something in their hands and said: "These are the trousers!" "This is the coat!" and "Here is the cloak!" and so on. "They are all as light as a cobweb, and one must feel as if one had nothing at all upon the body; but that is just the beauty of them."

The emperor undressed, and the swindlers pretended to put the new suit upon him, one piece after another; and the emperor looked at himself in the glass from every side.

"How well they look! How well they fit!" said all. "What a beautiful pattern! What fine colours! That is a magnificent suit of clothes!"

The emperor marched in the procession under the beautiful canopy, and all who saw him in the street and out of the windows exclaimed: "Indeed, the emperor's new suit is incomparable! What a long train he has! How well it fits him!" Nobody wished to let others know he saw nothing, for then he would have been unfit for his office or too stupid.

"But he has nothing on at all," said a little child at last. "Good heavens! listen to the voice of an innocent child," said the father, and one whispered to the other what the child had said. "But he has nothing on at all," cried at last the whole people. That made a deep impression upon the emperor, for it seemed to him that they were right; but he thought to himself, "Now I must bear up to the end." And the chamberlains walked with still greater dignity, as they carried the train which did not exist.

Government initiatives. The attitude that something must be seen to be done, even though it is of no lasting value. Vanity, folly, as destructive and harmful as any addition.

We need to be on our guard, seeking wisdom.

The example of Mary: faith, service, joy, sadness—that's life

The example of Jesus: faith, service, joy, sadness—that's life

Regular attendance at mass to remind ourselves of this as we take the spiritual nourishment, and arm ourselves to resist the evils of vanity

Trinity 11

Proper 16, Trinity 11, 2009, Year B

Epistle: Ephesians 6: 10-20

Psalm 34: 15-22.

Gospel: John 6: 56-69

Many church people are uncomfortable with the military images of today's epistle, and some of the hymns we're already sung. One of the regrettable features of the hymn book is that some of them have been edited out ...

But we can't escape them. They are there in the liturgy: Holy Holy Holy, Hosts, might, sabaoth, armies of God.

The Great Commission at the end of St Matthew's Gospel calls us to make disciples of all the world, and if you interpret that literally, it implies the use of force and coercion. That is how it was interpreted by the crusaders and by many missionaries of the last two hundred years: food in exchange for baptism, signing on the dotted line, and being governed by the Brits.

Paul also uses military language in this well known passage, so it's worth looking at.

Until the Romans became a world power, for the ordinary Roman citizen being a soldier meant stepping up to be counted in a national or local emergency, like today's special police; or living it up as a royal guard with lots of ceremony, good living and maybe some fighting in the event of a coup; or beating up other people as a mercenary or an adventurer.

Then the Romans created a full-time professional army. Soldiers were trained to defend their country's frontiers, garrison the towns, patrol the trouble spots, uphold the law and the authority of the emperor, and keep the peace. By St Paul's time, the main function of the Roman army was to defend and to protect (though whether those defended and protected saw it in the same light is another matter). And St Paul, as in today's Epistle, clearly sees the Roman soldier as a model for Christians.

It's not surprising that St Paul's images of the whole armour of God as equipment for Christian living have become familiar, since all baptised Christians are signed up for full-time service. The baptism service makes this clear: ***Fight valiantly as a disciple of Christ against sin, the world and the devil, and remain faithful to Christ to the end of thy life.***

Then as now a soldier's life was full of uncertainty. For in spite of TV adverts and the news from Afghanistan, being a soldier is not all about adrenaline-fuelled action, with all guns blazing. Much of the time is spent planning, preparing, waiting, and hoping the Commander in Chief has got the correct view of the situation. For much of the time apprehension and expectation go hand in hand.

As in many things, *being prepared* is the key; equipment must be up to scratch, physical and mental fitness are prerequisites. Hence all the spit and polish, hence the drill, the exercises, the manoeuvres in the field; all these things have to be kept going whenever opportunity offers.

Similarly, following his description of the Christian's vital equipment, St Paul goes on to speak of the way Christians should prepare for anything that might come. And the Christians' preparation for what St Paul calls spiritual warfare, for service, and for life itself is prayer – *persistent* prayer and *opportunistic* prayer.

Persistent does not mean doing nothing but pray, nor does it mean nagging at God like a small toddler who won't take no for an answer. Rather it means not giving up, trying the number again when you can't get through the first time or the second time, when the number seems always engaged or out of order. It means keeping on trying to make the contact or to keep the contact.

Opportunistic does not mean praying just when you feel like it, or at some time of emergency or crisis; it means using time; life itself even, with common sense. The soldier who before the battle of Edgehill in the Civil War had it right when he prayed: "Lord, thou knowest how busy I must be this day; if I forget thee, do not thou forget me"

While we're on the subject of negative aspects to prayer, perhaps it is worth adding that prayer is not asking God for things to suit our wants rather than our needs – like the small boy anxious to do well in his geography exam who asked God to make Paris the capital of Belgium. Nor is prayer a means of, or an excuse for dumping our problems on God. We are right in our intercessions to bring our anxieties and concerns to the Divine; but from then on, the responsibilities are ours to do something about them: action is demanded. As the Beatles sang in a different context, "WE can work it out"; our commander in chief wants us to understand His battle plan. Prayer unlocks God's purpose in us. We must work.

Prayer and preparation are different on different occasions for different people. Public worship is different from private prayer for example, just as the regimental exercise is different from the work-out in the gym. No-one should presume to tell other people the right way to pray, because there isn't one way that suits all. What there is, though, is the tradition of the church in the daily offices: discipline—the equivalent of the soldier's drill.

The armour of God: defence or offence?

Prayer: defence or offence?

belt of truth and purity: girdle

breastplate of righteousness

shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. helmet of salvation: amice

sword of the Spirit

Te Deum – it has praise, thanksgiving, a creed and a final prayer for God's mercy. It will always be heard wherever I am vicar.

Psalms, where hearts are opened to God with a freedom of speech we are often ashamed to acknowledge.

But when it comes down to it, prayer is simply getting and keeping in touch with God. It's a two way thing; the image of the telephone occurs again when Michel Quoist writes:

"I have just hung up; why did he telephone? I don't know; oh I get it. I talked a lot and listened very little. Forgive me, Lord, it was a monologue and not a dialogue. I explained my idea but didn't get yours. Since I didn't listen, I learned nothing. Since I didn't listen, I didn't help. Since I didn't listen we didn't communicate. Forgive me Lord, for we were connected, and now we are cut off"

Michael Ramsey.

All can be prayer.

Lord, thou knowest how busy I must be this day. If I forget thee, do not thou forget me.

Trinity 11 AMMP

Trinity 11, Matins Brassington, MP Middleton
Proper 16

Joshua 24: 1-2, 14-18 – choose

John 6: 56-69 – choose. Also Eucharistic references.

Ephesians 6: 10-20 – how to do it when you have chosen.

Williams, Prince Charles, Betjeman, only true for him

It's spooky, as you might say, how the lessons for today chime in with my prevailing mood this week. I've returned from a holiday: not long enough, exhausted after finishing the ministry course, the emotion of ordination, the stress of moving house. Then family difficulties. Then I hear of other people's problems: parents, children, health, disease, addiction, unhappiness, and I begin to think how everyone is much more virtuous and holy than I am. Indeed, that's probably why it's good to have joined the ranks of the clergy, because I'm now probably more likely than before to get to heaven.

And there's the depressing stuff we hear from the wide world: the patent insincerity and lies of many politicians, the obvious wriggling out of responsibility, the abject failure to display humility, the dishonesty of some prominent captains of industry and commerce, the troubles of dealing with utility companies, the fat cats. And then the middle east where, as Lionel Blue said the other day, things seem to be ruled more by circulating testosterone rather than by honest discussion and listening.

There is plenty that could draw us down into despair. There's plenty to distract us from concentrating on God.

Oh you fool, Stanley. It is in dealing with problems like this that we meet God. God became man – and he had plenty problems of his own – notably persecution and torture. Job ranted at God. Amos ranted at indolent women – cows he called them. About one third of the psalms are rants at God. It's OK to rant at God. By so doing, the way forward often becomes clear because a rant like that can help to clear out rubbish that was blocking the view.

We must be honest with ourselves and with God. It's no use pretending to God that all is well when we feel like a good weep. On a very personal note, over recent months, I've had plenty opportunity to reflect on the huge change that I've put Susan and myself through. It hasn't all been easy, and bits of it continue to be trying. But what was the alternative? I'll tell you – the alternative was a kind of death. Death of an inner part of me that is beginning, I hope, to grow like a tender shoot towards the light.

And this, I think, is one of the ways that I interpret Jesus' words in the gospel reading we have heard – the importance of the spirit over the flesh – though I find this passage difficult to interpret. We need some guidance of how to go about doing this, how to decide on the appropriate course of action. And here Paul in Ephesians, a very famous extract, gives advice. The letter was probably written to several churches in what is now Turkey and is amongst the earliest Christian documents, about 60s AD. Some of Paul's letters were evidently written in response to particular circumstances. And some are frankly rants (Galatians), but this is a gentle and encouraging letter about what it takes to build up the church

Breastplate of righteousness
Gospel of peace
Helmet of salvation
Sword of the spirit
Constant watchfulness

Let's look at some of those words

helmet of hope
breastplate of faith and love necessary prerequisites for Hebrew salvation *shalom* (security, peace, victory)

Armour of new humanity, all in pursuit of truth – which is difficult: think of the Mirfield fathers in South Africa, Bonhoeffer in Germany, Sin in the Philippines, Romero in San Salvador, the Methodists in the industrial revolution, the sum priests in the twentieth, thingie in Iraq, thingie in Liverpool

To live according to Christian teaching is to seek truth, not self-deception:

Truth can divide
Truth can hurt before it heals.

Truth produce hatred
Truth can leave a person standing alone
Truth can appear to fail before it succeeds

Christians have sometimes, wrongly I think, used passages like this, (Thessalonians also) with military images to be aggressive, to colonise, to convert those of other faiths. And we could have an argument about whether or not they were right to do so (I think not). The armour, to my mind, is defensive. Remember, Paul was writing for people who saw Roman soldiers every day. Conquerors to be sure, but also guardians or a kind of peace. And centurions etc girded in armour to withstand attack, not to attack.

Defence against the evil spiritual powers, those niggling inner thoughts that so quickly multiply to eat away at our confidence. These are the spiritual diseases that make us think that what we need to solve our problems is another pair of shoes, or another bar of chocolate or another fix of alcohol, or sugar, or tobacco, or heroin, or cocaine, or shopping – an addiction like all the others. Some people have said that religion is an addition just like any other – and so well it might be, but if it is, and I'm not saying it is, on the whole it's less expensive and less damaging than others.

Paul is giving us advice about combating the evil that eats away at our core.

And probably the best tool in all of this is prayer. Paul calls us to prayer – pray without ceasing.

So for the final part of this address I want to share some thoughts about the nature of prayer,

It is not just sitting with your hands together in church.

Different ways of doing it (EMMTC SHEET)

Prayer can be almost anything.

Working

Doing your job well

Tending creation

Creating

God-directed thoughts

Working things out using your God-given intellect – ratiocination – discernment

It is useful to put this into the context of regular disciplined prayer when you can. Perhaps in the morning, or in the evening. Kelham on the bog. With others. We have daily prayer in the mornings and most evenings at Wirksworth, and certainly I'd be happy to join you here if there was some of you that wanted to meet for this. The problem with regarding everything as prayer, is that if prayer is everything it then becomes nothing. But do not for one moment imagine that you have to adopt a special posture or attitude or state of mind. Just listen to God, and for most of us, since we aren't aware that God speaks directly to us, that means listening to our innermost thoughts. Take time to sit in silence, or lie, or whatever, to listen to what your 'conscience' or whatever is telling you. That is a form of prayer. Listen don't babble on. Be silent.

Used to be nervous and uncertain

But relax into talking to god

Sometimes you need to shout and rant at god - DO IT

What are you praying to and what for

If you are asking for specific things, are you bargaining with god

Is there

Anthony Bloom

CS Lewis

Raymond Raynes – focuses us

But best of all, just LISTEN. Be silent. It is useless to go looking for God, Just be and let it happen.

Silence

So, listening to God, and girding yourself with the defensive armour of righteousness, peace, knowledge and wisdom, watchfulness, we will be better equipped to deal with these feelings of dejection (spiritual enemies) when things are getting on top of us, as they do.

And let us use each other – the church – for mutual support. See the church as the nourisher, the provider of the bread of life literally in HC and metaphorically in learning and exploring. The womb in which we grow and develop.

Otherwise, to what can we turn? Communism didn't work, materialism and capitalism are showing themselves as deeply corrupt, the culture of fame is about as sustaining as rice paper, if that.

So put on your armour, sisters and brothers, and pray without ceasing in whatever manner suits you. And don't let anyone tell you that your way of doing it is wrong.

Our only hope is accepting that we are all part of the mystical body of Christ. As Peter says, there is no alternative.

The church is not the mass of saints, but the mass of sinners who repent.

Trinity 11 PMEv

Trinity 11, Evensong Wirksworth

Exodus 4:27-5:1: trust in the Lord

I've returned from a holiday: not long enough, exhausted after finishing the ministry course, the emotion of ordination, the stress of moving house. Then family difficulties. Then I hear of other people's problems: parents, children, health, disease, addiction, unhappiness, and I begin to think how everyone is much more virtuous and holy than I am. Indeed, that's probably why it's good to have joined the ranks of the clergy, because I'm now probably more likely than before to get to heaven.

And there's the depressing stuff we hear from the wide world: the patent insincerity and lies of many politicians, the obvious wriggling out of responsibility, the abject failure to display humility, the dishonesty of some prominent captains of industry and commerce, the troubles of dealing with utility companies, the fat cats. And then the Middle East where, as Lionel Blue said the other day, things seem to be ruled more by circulating testosterone rather than by honest discussion and listening.

There is plenty that could make us doubt that trusting in the Lord was much use. There's plenty to distract us from concentrating on God.

Oh you fool, Stanley. It is in dealing with problems like this that we meet God. God became man – and he had plenty problems of his own.

And if we want to practice trusting in the Lord, Hebrews directs us.

Hebrews 13:16-21. Share. Listen (obey) those over you (teachers not politicians),

Pray – so what is it? What do we expect from it?

It is not just sitting with your hands together in church.
Different ways of doing it (EMMTC SHEET)

What are you praying to and what for

If you are asking for specific things, are you bargaining with god – I suspect we've all done this.

In fact, what is your image of God.

Is God someone who won't do anything unless you ask. So I'll cure this leukaemia because they've asked, but not that one.

In patristic teaching God is impassible, unchanging (Immortal invisible). The idea that God might respond to prayers would mean that God was capable of changing – from not acting to acting. If God really is unchanging in this way God is incapable of responding to prayer, so there's no point doing it. What does unchanging mean. Is it the same as unfeeling

anyway many of us have had experiences that some would interpret as God acting in their lives.

The laws of physics are immutable, but that does not mean that physical things are not changing. Perhaps that idea is one that you might find useful as an image of God – a system – the Greek word for which is logos, translated in HS as the word.

But even if God were unfeeling and immutable, does that mean it's not worth praying to God?

I suggest that it does not. It has the effect of focusing our minds for action, internal action or external action.

Raymond Raynes – prayer focuses us.

Prayer 'does not change God's purpose, it releases it' – it is 'the key that unlocks the forces of good in the world.' It enables us to cooperate with God – for God needs our cooperation for his purposes to be fulfilled. It is almost as if God will not achieve his purpose without our cooperation.

CS Lewis – prayer doesn't change God, it changes me.

So some sort of action is demanded. This is serious – there's no point in praying for something unless we are prepared to change.

Anthony Bloom. 'Intercession means an involvement that may spell death, and I am frightened when I hear a congregation of people intercede for one need after the other, piling up on their shoulders all the needs of the world just for the time Evensong lasts. After that they put it down on God's shoulders, and they go out elevated with a new emotion.'

My Malawi example.

SO HOW?

Prayer can be almost anything.

Working

Doing your job well

Tending creation

Creating

God-directed thoughts

Working things out using your God-given intellect – ratiocination – discernment

It is useful to put this into the context of regular disciplined prayer when you can. Perhaps in the morning, or in the evening. Kelham on the bog. With others. We have daily prayer in the mornings and most evenings at Wirksworth. You may ask, if I have such a wide view of prayer – and I do – why bother with the discipline? The answer is that if everything is prayer, then it becomes nothing.

But do not for one moment imagine that you have to adopt a special posture or attitude or state of mind. There are many ways of doing it. Any kind of talking to God – communing with ourselves (God within).

Ranting at God is prayer. Ranting is OK. We must be honest with God and with ourselves. It's not just sitting there and pretending that all is well when it's not in a terribly Anglican nice sort of way.

Job.

About one third of the psalms are rants at God. It's OK to rant at God. By so doing, the way forward often becomes clear because a rant like that can help to clear out rubbish that was blocking the view.

Then there's repetitive prayer, words and actions.
Actions imprint things into our brains.

But the one I want to recommend to you tonight is one that I suspect is under-used.

Just listen to God, and for most of us, since we aren't aware that God speaks directly to us, that means listening to our innermost thoughts. Take time to sit in silence, or lie, or whatever, to listen to what your 'conscience' or whatever is telling you. That is a form of prayer. Listen don't babble on. Be silent.

But best of all, just LISTEN. Be silent

Silence

Edwina Gateley:

Let your God love you.

Be silent. Be still. Alone.

Empty before your God.

Say nothing. Ask nothing. Be silent. Be still.

Let your God look upon you. That is all.

He knows. He understands.

He loves you with an enormous love.

He only wants to look upon you with his love.
Quiet, still, be.
Let your God love you.....Amen.

So, listening to God, and girding yourself with the defensive armour of righteousness, peace, knowledge and wisdom, watchfulness, we will be better equipped to deal with feelings of dejection (spiritual enemies) when things are getting on top of us, as they do, or when we are feeling sorry for ourselves, as we do.

And let us use each other – the church – for mutual support. See the church as the nourisher, the provider of the bread of life literally in HC and metaphorically in learning and exploring together. The womb in which we grow and develop.

Otherwise, to what can we turn? Communism didn't work, materialism and capitalism are showing themselves as deeply corrupt, the culture of fame is about as sustaining as rice paper, if that.

So put on your armour, sisters and brothers, and pray without ceasing in whatever manner suits you. And don't let anyone tell you that your way of doing it is wrong. But above all remember that you won't hear God unless in prayer you SHUT UP.

“Prayer is a great weapon, a rich treasure, a wealth that is never exhausted, an undisturbed refuge, a cause of tranquility, the root of a multitude of blessings, and their source.” —St. John Chrysostom

Trinity 12 AMHC

Proper 18 Year B
Trinity 12
HC Bonsall, Carsington
03.09.2006

Deuteronomy 4:1-2,6-9
James 1:17-27
Mark 7:1-8,14-15,21-23

Picture this.

The world is created from God and by God. Proverbs 8: The Lord created me (sophia), the first of his acts ... before the beginning of the earth. John 1: In the beginning was the word (logos) and the word was God – everything was made by logos and of logos. Two words for the material out of which the cosmos is made: sofia and logos. Are they the same? I say they are: sofia for Hebrew readership and logos for Greek.

The created world comes into being.

The entrance into this world of personified sofia, personified logos, personified God as Jesus Christ, and the Christ-events from incarnation to ascension and Pentecost, changes the monochrome old ways into the Technicolor new. Like Mary Poppins. It transforms old ways into new. It transforms us, if we agree to being transformed.

The readings for today look at some aspects of transformation.

The message from Deuteronomy this morning seems to be that diligent observance of God's law as revealed to Moses – the ten commandments I suppose – is the basis for living life.

But the message of Jesus the Christ is that blind obedience to rules is not enough. Our thoughts and intentions just as, or more, important than our actions. If our thoughts and intentions are right, then our actions will be judged right, almost whatever the consequences.

In this text, Jesus is doing two things.

- He's *changing* Moses' teaching – a sign to his listeners that if he has the authority to do this, He must be divine.

- He's deliberately and provocatively upsetting prevailing opinion and practice.

Interestingly, Jesus demonstrates a sound knowledge of anatomy when he says that whatever we take in will come out of the sewer – cloaca – that part of the body that develops into the rectum, anus, bladder and female genital tract. What goes in must come out, albeit modified.

The digestive tract, in and out, doesn't matter. It is my heart, the seat of my intellect and emotion as they thought then, that exposes me for what we are. What I think and intend says more about me than obeying rules for the sake of it.

To give churchy examples:

- sitting or kneeling or standing for prayers matters not at all.
- Receiving communion standing or kneeling matters not at all.

This seems to be commendation of what has been Anglican practice for 500 years – use God-given intellect as well as rules. Rowan Williams story – harder to be an Anglican than RC.

This is not to say ...

So I do justice to myself by guarding what comes out of my heart. I'm not very good at this: I feel very ashamed of the countless times as a father when I did things out of a sense of duty – doing things to be seen to have done them – rather than for love. Perhaps I am being hard on myself, people tell me I am good at that, but nevertheless that is what comes to mind today.

If these evil intentions come from within, this raises questions about the nature of evil.

If God created everything, does that mean that God created evil? This is one of the most fundamentally difficult questions of theology, and there is no entirely satisfactory answer. A commonly held view is that God created humans in God's image certainly, and with free will, and it is that free will that seems to lead us off course. Like pushing a supermarket trolley that refuses to go straight. Some people call this original sin, but some day I'll tell you why I don't hold with that notion – along with Eastern Christianity.

The psalm says keep thy tongue from evil and thy lips that they speak no guile. The question is how? James, Jesus' brother perhaps, offers some thoughts.

First, listen much and speak little.

Act certainly – out of charity and love rather than duty.

Second, self examination.

To 'rid myself of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness' requires self examination. James tells us that God is unchanging, and the unchanging nature of God is worth exploring, but in this context I take it to mean that since God knows Godself, God has no need of this kind of behaviour improvement because God is perfect. I am not, and I have need of thought-improvement. The human psyche is so complex, and so much of it is hidden, that I can never be sure of what is really going on. As the introduction to MP and EP says, if we think that we have no evil, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.

It is good, and confronting to remember that Holy Scripture tells us that we are created in God's image. We contain a divine core. But the trouble is that life's many vicissitudes lead us to develop thick skins that hide this divine core, like Russian dolls. James uses the phrase 'implanted word' – word in Greek being logos, In the beginning, and I suggest that this divine core is the implanted word – God within.

It is this that we need to make contact with and listen to when we are trying to judge how to act or decide. One way to do this is prayer.

So third, my final thoughts concern prayer.

It is not just sitting with your hands together in church.

Different ways of doing it (EMMTC SHEET)

Don't let anyone tell you that your way of doing it is wrong.

Prayer can be almost anything.

Working
Doing your job well
Tending creation
Creating
God-directed thoughts
Working things out using your God-given intellect – ratiocination – discernment

Then there's repetitive prayer, words and actions. Actions imprint things into our brains.

Ranting at God is prayer.
Job. Psalms. By ranting, the way often becomes clear because a rant can help to clear out rubbish that was blocking the view.

But the one I want to recommend to you tonight is one that I suspect is under-used.

Just **listen** to God, and for most of us, since we aren't aware that God speaks directly to us, that means listening to our innermost thoughts. Take time to sit in silence, or lie, or whatever, to listen to what your 'conscience' or whatever is telling you. That is a form of prayer.

Listen don't babble on. Be silent.

Silence

Listen to the still small voice. This kind of prayer helps us to get to our inner selves, our divine cores. When you reach that, it will release God-ness into your being and flush out unworthy thoughts. Then we will be reborn into the Gospel – thy kingdom will have come for you on earth as it is in heaven.

Trinity 12 PMEv

Trinity 12 Evensong WW

Exodus 12:21-27
Passover. Protection through ritual

Matthew 4:23-5:20
Jesus healing, then to mountain
Beatitudes

I have spent much of all this week thinking about this sermon ..
I am taking a risk in this sermon. I have

Picture this.

The world is created from God and by God. Proverbs 8: The Lord created me (sophia), the first of his acts ... before the beginning of the earth. John 1: In the beginning was the word (logos) and the word was God – everything was made by logos and of logos. Two words for the material out of which the cosmos is made: sofia and logos. Are they the same? I say they are: sofia for Hebrew readership and logos for Greek.

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The readings for today look at aspects of that transformation.

In the first few verses of the gospel reading we heard this evening we hear of Jesus's growing popularity as he went about

- **teaching**
- **Preaching**

- **healing.** Healing those who sought healing
- the light bulb has to want to change and never making a big fuss of it

A ministry of word and deed – not just fine thoughts and fine sayings, but actions
As with prayer last week – prayer demands action

With this kind of action, we might then begin to make an impression on society instead of being rather peripheral to today's society

Peter McVerry
Derby

Beatitudes

WORDS and TRANSLATIONS

In today's world when values that seem to be commended are fame and fortune, image and spin, we hear here of the transformation, the inversion of values, the entry into the parallel universe that is God's kingdom.

And the people who will find joy are about as far removed from those that prosper in our world today as could be.

- Blessed - makarios - God looks with favour, content, satisfied (not worldly wealth blessed). **Joy**
- Poor (in spirit added??) no sense of worth to God? Humble? Word for beggars. Can bring nothing to God. God gives them everything. Not pride in one's own virtue like the Pharisees. Jesus is not saying that poverty is a blessing in itself. Poverty has nothing to do with choosing to live simply. Why is it that people who write about poverty are hardly ever bothered by poverty?

Old people I see on my travels.

- Mourn grieving for one's sins and for the state of society rather than people.
- Meek – gentle. Not weak. Great strength that comes from humility. Meek – contentment with the simple life in a possession-hungry world. Psalm 37 The meek shall inherit the land.
- Hunger and thirst for righteousness, IT concept, eucharistic?? Merciful (eleison)
- And these people are often hounded and reviled. Persecuted, prosecuted, reviled. Tutu.
- Pure in heart – kardia – this morning
- Peace – shalom – wellbeing of whole of created order – wisdom really
peace of mind, eirenic, safety, freedom from worry, create peace. Yes peacemakers - who bring the warring together. This is difficult stuff. And it may require heads to be banged together.

So what good is all this?

salt and light. The gospel transforms people – changes the taste, illuminates. Salt must be salty otherwise it is thrown out. Certainly not colourless or blending with the scenery or nice

all this fulfils the law rather than supersedes it. Jesus is changing Moses' law – a sign of his divinity.

Beatitudes like through black hole into parallel universe.

When? Thy kingdom come not after death – as it is in God's space – in God.

Live in the present as it will be

So what are we to do?

It is hard to say anything other than that we should stand up vocally to the corrections of society.

Recent poll. corruption

It is worth reading Ibrahim Mogra for Leicester

Magnificat
Unexpected

Church as comforter – paraclete – strengthener, empowering agent

Light – Glow worms

When the church lights up like a lighthouse on a hill it will begin to be noticed

Society will take it and us seriously.

– his kingdom is HERE for each one of us NOW, as it is in heaven.

Trinity 14

Year B, Trinity 14, Proper 20, HC
17.09.06

Bradbourne communion (ext)
Kirk Ireton Evensong but HC lessons

Isaiah 50:4-9a

James 3:1-12

Mark 8:27-38

The two themes that jump out at me from today's gospel are first, who is Jesus, and second, the inevitability of suffering.

Who was Jesus?

Who did he think he was?

Is there any evidence that he existed?

Are Gospel accounts reliable?

What happened to the Trinity at the crucifixion? Was there a partial amputation?

Did, and does, God suffer?

I'm not going to explore all these in an evening sermon, so I start with the question that Jesus addresses to each one of us.

But who do you say that I am?

I suspect there are as many images of Jesus as there are readers of Scripture.

- spiritual teacher
- charismatic healer
- mythical hero
- Hellenistic philosopher
- political revolutionary
- wisdom sage
- social prophet
- apocalyptic prophet
- divine Saviour
- craftsman
- bon viveur
- provoker
- disturber
- unpredictable orator
- anti-hero who overturned values

But hang on. God is love. Jesus is God. So Jesus is Love and Love is Jesus.

So then, all those descriptions of Jesus can be used about love.
Provocative, disturbing, teaching, healing, subversive, wisdom, prophet,

And this could then take us into the 13th Chapter of 1 Corinthians

Love in action.

Charis not cupidity

Outgoing love in which we try to discover the other person. agape

And suffering love
Suffering is part of Jesus
We neither try to pretend that it does not happen
Jesus sticks to his guns though he knows what will happen
He does not resist
He tolerates what happens to him
Human suffering on the cross

Theologians argue about what it means for God to suffer – indeed whether God suffers. But God can surely *perceive* our suffering, grieve for us and be angry for us. This is God suffering, what Origen called His passion of love for fallen humankind.' We hear talk of God's anger – but this is anger with suffering, not with us. We hear talk of God's judgement, but this is rather discernment and decision making.

Suffering – for others. This is PASSION.

Love again.

Jesus was cross with Peter. Do not minimise suffering. Do not pretend that it can be avoided. Don't tell untruths.

Part of the human condition is to learn how to be ministered to. We spend too much time acting and serving others, but we also serve by being served. Passivity, Passion, Suffering, as in suffer the little children – allow the little children.

So we need to learn to experience the world, as well as act in it.

Resurrection follows passion and suffering for Jesus, as it will for us.

Jesus' death is a transformation *in* God. Crucifixion is followed by resurrection, new life.

If you like cosmology then it might be like the implosion of a star into the black hole followed by rebirth into the other universe. So, Jesus Christ drawn by the gravitational pull of Golgotha, only to emerge in an instant resurrected in glory. And again and again as after each fall, each error, each sin, we pick ourselves up, dust ourselves down, and start all over again.

God became man and suffered all men's woes. We didn't ask him to. **That is love.** Through the incarnation, life and crucifixion of Jesus, God enters into all human experience: *God enters man.*

That is love. Through the resurrection man is reborn – a constant cycle of death followed by resurrection: eternal regeneration, eternal Eucharist, re-incarnation. *Man enters God.* **That is love.** We fall short, repent and are forgiven – crucifixion immediately followed by resurrection. Without repentance there is no resurrection, merely an increasing dis-ease precipitating ill-health.

Jesus tells each one of us to take up our cross.

not so much going to find a cause then taking it up, but living in the present – what you have with you now. Living in the present.

I've spent much of my life trying to change things

Pattern of my life

Don't regret what happened easily

And look at the riches that have come my way

I must try to be more grateful.

I don't see suffering as meaning tolerating patiently and sitting back.

Suffering surely calls for action

Jesus in everyone

Disadvantaged people are prophets in – people who reveal our values, make us uncomfortable.

So Jesus is Love, and let us never think we are too sinful or unprepared to meet him.

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,

Guilty of dust and sin.

But quick-eyed 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 unkinde, ungratefull? Ah my deare,
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, sayes Love, and taste my meat:
So I did sit and eat.

Jesus is love and love takes many forms so Jesus takes many forms. It guides but does not insist. It stands alongside. It surprises. It is sometimes angry – hatred of wrongdoing. It is not always 'nice' and it is never bland or anodyne. This sounds like the hymn to love in 1 Corinthians. That is what Jesus is like. And we can see him if we try in every situation and every person. Jesus and love are often unseen until they have gone – like the road to Emmaus.

Schweitzer next

He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside, he came to those men who did not know who he was. He says the same words, 'Follow me!', and sets us to those tasks which he must fulfil in our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether wise or unwise, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the suffering that they may experience in his fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, the incarnation of love, whose suffering, death and resurrection transforms us, and whose righteousness dawns upon the world scattering the darkness of sin, death and injustice, grant us grace and glory.

Trinity 15

Year B, Trinity 15, Proper 21, HC
24.09.06

Kirk Ireton HC

Wisdom 1.16-2.1; 2:12-22
James 3:13-4:3,7,8a
Mark 9:30-37.

Jesus announces his imminent departure from the face of the planet and the disciples are – without even a decent pause – arguing about succession and hierarchy. Not even a 'gosh we'll be sad to see you go' or 'what about a farewell party.'

Remind you of anything?

This is curiously like what's going on in the party that masquerades under the title of the Labour Party. Mr Blair announces his imminent departure and the latter-day saints that surround him are bickering about the succession.

In one of the messages of today's gospel, Jesus tells us to just get on with the job – JUST DO IT – and stop fretting about consequences, rewards, hierarchies, promotions. And have no regard to whom you serve: the divine, Jesus, is in everybody – if we serve the least amongst us, we serve God.

This is difficult advice to take in a world where rank and promotion prospects affect incomes, pensions, our ability to provide for dependants and so on.

And it's difficult when competitiveness is hardwired into us animals, this hardwiring a result of divine creation. And let me tell you that I am in position to talk sanctimoniously about getting rid of ambition. When I was a junior lecturer, I made a list of UK Professors of Anatomy with their ages and likely dates of death or retirement. I can't image that clergy would be thing thus about dead man's shoes when a bishop kicks the bucket.

But to live in this imperfect and complex world as it is, we can not ignore these practical and biological things. We must think twice about rushing headlong into self-denying service to others that would mean that we could not clothe and feed our children. There is truth is what Margaret Thatcher said that you can not give to the poor unless you yourself have some wealth to give.

So we must employ the right use of reason, of logic. Pope Benedict said recently in a lecture in Regensburg that not to use reason is to go against God, building on what you might call natural law expounded by Aquinas. This was the talk that got him into trouble. Bt the Pope is right: God gave us the ability to reason and so we must use it. The question is how.

We need to use reason so that we do not trample on the needs of others, or fail to consider the weak and poor. And this means that we must not become too self-obsessed, too ego driven.

James in the epistle is absolutely right when he says that conflicts come from our egos. In fact, with a few words changed here and there, this could have been written by Freud – the battle between ego, superego and id.

We need divine wisdom from above, rather than ego-driven wisdom from below: to reason the right course of action. And divine wisdom from above is implanted in each and every one of us at creation.

In Proverbs 8 you read that wisdom was there at creation, the material out of which the world was made perhaps.

And Later wisdom was personified as Jesus Christ. So wisdom is within all creation, within us all. The trouble is that as imperfect humans we seem unable to stop the light of wisdom within being obscured by ego and error.

We have descriptions of wisdom – some descriptions in Proverbs about what it is, and some in today's Wisdom reading about what it is not.

It is kind, without envy or show, not vain, not self-seeking, yields, without hypocrisy?? Haven't I heard those words somewhere before. Yes, the wisdom that comes from above is love.

And one of the things about wisdom from above, according to the Wisdom literature, esp Proverbs, it that it's practical. Wisdom from above is that which leads to a well-run ship. It maximises good, if you like, given the circumstances. It is reason.

Tell that to the politicians in a world where the gap between rich and poor is widening. Where so often those in power serve the needs of the powerful. Where favours are granted to financial contributors and those whose yachts or palaces are borrowed for the summer.

Wisdom is love. Not soppy love Mills and Boon love but practical down to earth necessary love. If you serve the powerless you serve me.

Jesus sounds harsh in the Gospels, especially Mark, and love can be harsh. Love is by not 'nice'. Love may say no, it may hate wrongdoing, it may demand repentance, but it is always careful and considerate and without hypocrisy ... 1 Corinthians 13 again.

- Wisdom from below, ego driven, eats us up, destroys us, embitters us.
- Wisdom from above enlightens and enlivens us, it lights us up.
- Wisdom from above is love, light and knowledge. Important because the three things **together** are necessary. Not love alone – that's useless without action, and love and action are useless without practical know-how.

Wisdom from above is love of love. And wisdom is practical – it demands action.

A question each one of us must ask ourselves, then, is what are we going to **do** - do, not sit and think fine thoughts about, but **do** – to help those in whom the divine spark is dimmed by circumstance, but present just as in you and me?

Trinity 16

Proper 21, Trinity 16

Carsington HC, Alderwasley HC

Numbers 11:4-6,10-16,24-29

James 5:13-20

Mark 9:38-50

Bit of a risk today

Irish story, Kilmacanogue, starting from here

When I was in training for theological course

When I think about next week's sermon

When I contemplate doing anything tax, selling houses, dealing with difficult issues

Of if only I had not done this

Of only I had not moved to Ireland and so on.

Just get on with it. This is a matter of taking responsibility for where I am, and the situation I'm in, and doing what I can to deal with present circumstances. Living in the present.

Living in the present and taking responsibility for my situation is at least part of the message of today's readings.

I don't find this easy.

Old Testament lesson

The Israelites are always complaining. They were freed from slavery, but then complained that their food used to be better then, and wanted someone else to do something about it.

How often do we want someone else to do something about crime, about the famine in Darfur, about the political situation.

This is the message of the Gospel really. If people call on the power of God, they have to accept the responsibilities that this brings.

Growing up

Take responsibility for ourselves, and live in the present

So often we cling to the past for the wrong reasons: trying to fool ourselves about attitudes

I'm not even talking of progress: I doubt that there is any such thing as progress in the sense that the politicians use it, only that we need to move on from where we are, not from where we would like to be.

Realism.

Clairvoyance.

This means renouncing ties that bind us. Perhaps ties that bind us to the past, or to some addiction we think we can't do without.

This is, I think, what Jesus Christ means when he talks of giving up family and so on. It means stopping being dependent on them – in all senses.

leave family – link to the past

Sell all your belongings – link to the past

Jesus Christ himself respected the boundaries of others. He did not press his services on those who did not want them.

Dust from feet

Healing only those who want to be healed

Don't necessarily stick to laws, but interpret them with love

Don't get stuck on habits and traditions

If you do get stuck on laws etc, you might as well go the whole hog and hand/foot/eye

Don't condemn others who do good things but aren't part of your club. If you do, where will you stop/ Will you cut off your hand if it offends, or your foot, or your eye?

Live in the present and take responsibility for yourself.

We are increasingly, it seems, allowing others to decide more and more for us:

The more the government decides for us, the more we complain. And yet when a baby is attacked by dogs, we want laws brought in to curb dogs.

So, do we want freedom, or do we want state-organised protection. We can't have both.

If we have freedom, then so does everyone else, and state protection is reduced. We need to take responsibility for what we do and the risks we take

If we have state governing what we do, we lose freedom. We must accept that our options are limited.

We can't have the good bits of both. We can't have freedom for us, and protection from what others might do to us, since that would curb the freedom of others.

We need to take responsibility for ourselves and accept reasonable risks. Responsibility to look after yourself.

The need for prayer

prayer does not change God's purpose, it releases it' – the 'key that unlocks the forces of good in the world. **Said before at Carsington**

And the other big message that I take home from today's gospel is that we must not come between anyone else and God. We must do nothing that hinders contact between another being and God, and do everything to aid it – if necessary getting out of the way. In a family situation, this means not clinging to our children, allowing them to leave the nest

In church situation it means not forcing people to conform to what is right for us, but accepting that different people see things differently, and respecting the views of others.

Accept what others do that is good, and do not question their motives.

Lionel Blue

He made his own explorations and decisions

He discovered that he didn't know where he fitted

And I find myself in a similar position

But then I think we made our God too small

Evangelical, Catholic, other religions, missions

There's a wideness in God's mercy
like the wideness of the sea;
there's a kindness in his justice,
which is more than liberty.

For the love of God is broader
than the measure of man's mind;
and the heart of the Eternal
is most wonderfully kind.

But we make his love too narrow
By false limits of our own
And we magnify his strictures
With a zeal He will not own.

If our love were but more simple,
we should take him at his word;
and our life would be all gladness
for the goodness of the Lord.

Trinity 17

Proper 22, Trinity 17

Wirksworth HC, Idridgehay HC

Genesis 2:18-24

Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12

Mark 10:2-16

Basing this homily on today's readings, it would be easy to harangue you about the sanctity of marriage and the sinfulness of divorce. I am not going to do that, because there is a problem with such a simplistic understanding. When we read Holy Scripture we do well to have several questions at the back of our minds, such as:

- why was this written?
- how long after the events it describes was it written, so is it reliable?
- at whom was it aimed, and why?
- in whose interests was it written?

In this particular Gospel passage, for example,

- it is useful to know that Mark was writing about 30 years after the crucifixion, when the eye-witnesses were beginning to die, so a record needed to be made – and fast while someone could still remember
- it is useful to know that Mark's gospel is the shortest and most telegraphic in style.
- we need to see that the Pharisees were trying, once again, to trap Jesus into saying something that they could criticize him for, but he gives an answer which they don't expect, and which turns the tables on them by asking them what Moses allows.
- it is interesting to know that Jesus turns accepted rules in favour of women (material for another sermon)
- it is relevant to know that Jesus is speaking to people governed by the much-divorced Herod family, and he may have wanted to twist the knife in the wound a bit here (where did we get the idea of Gentle Jesus, meek and mild?)

I could go on.

Mark, in a hurry, is very blunt and very direct. His message is subtly different in Matthew (later) and Paul (earlier), both of whom soften Mark's teaching subtly, Paul, for example, allowing separation, or divorce, on grounds of porneia immorality.

This modification of what seems to be harsh teaching is, therefore, necessary. After all, Paul's account was earlier than Mark's – could Mark in his rush to get things on paper have got it wrong?

This is why reliance on Holy Scripture alone is dangerous. Holy Scripture is interpreted in the context of doctrine, tradition and experience. And this is one of the characteristics of the Anglican tradition: the use of discernment, allowing the Holy Spirit, or Divine wisdom, to work through us in the interpretation of Scripture.

So then we need to stand back from all three readings to get a wider vision. And what they seem to be saying to me concerns relationships.

The picture of the Godhead that we hold is one in which God consists of a triangle of relationships: Father and Son, Father and Spirit, Son and Spirit – already a community within the Godhead.

And marriage, or indeed living together, is a relationship and is therefore in some sense a reflection of this divine household. All of us who live or have lived with someone else, married or not, sexual partners or not, know that we grow together, and that what affects one affects all.

So the law of Moses might be one thing. But in the Christian faith, as we heard in the postcommunion prayer last week, love is the fulfilment of the law – or, the law is superseded by agape, caritas. And agape, caritas, we know, like divine wisdom, is patient, kind, tender, compassionate. God is love, and love is patient, kind, tender, compassionate.

So why do we humans so often find relationships difficult? Relationships between family members, relationships between work colleagues, relationships in the church, relationships on the PCC.

It comes down, of course, to the fact that we are humans, and we suffer to a greater or lesser extent from pride in all its forms. Pride, ambition, hypocrisy – the opposites of what love should be – and, this may come as a surprise to you, I suffer terribly from all this. It is even possible to have negative pride – continuous self-criticism is inverted pride, the notion that my sin is so bad that not even the Lord can forgive me.

In all our relationships we should remember that we are made in God's image.

Jesus is the perfect reflection of God – wisdom terminology. We have Christ within, as Paul and the church fathers tell us. And all of us will see the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, and approach that image as Wesley says: finish then thy new creation.

Mankind was made little lower than the angels, and God became man. So we are capable of approaching Godlikeness in relationships. And to do this, today's Gospel suggests but we need the openness of children – childlikeness.

We need to stop resisting God's grace implanted in us.

We need to receive Divine love as gift – we do not need to earn it, just bask in it like whales basking in the sunshine.

All we have to do is recognize Christ's presence, and feed from him in our hearts, as we shall shortly be invited to do at the holy table.

'It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me' Matthew, Paul, Peter and John all tell us that we can share in the divine nature, our unlimited intimacy with God cleansing our worldly sin and disease. We need to cooperate with the Christ within.

Life is full of difficulties, and cooperating with the Christ within, exposing our inner selves to God's healing grace, might enable us to be sensitive and gracious in dealing with these difficulties. Knowing when to yield, putting yourself in the other person's shoes, trying to see their point of view. And, of course, knowing when to call it a day: Christ was not one to flog a dead horse, and neither need we. I need to heed this advice as much as anyone.

It's through dealing with difficult experiences that we grow – tested in the refiner's fire. When we enfold our past, when we absorb and learn from our experiences, we can allow them to help us to help others: our pain and joy can help create a source of healing for others.

God's mercy can be our mercy. And we might remember that God's mercy is not limited to my likes and dislikes, or even yours, or yours.

Look at Hymn XXX

There's a wideness in God's mercy
like the wideness of the sea;
there's a kindness in his justice,
which is more than liberty.

For the love of God is broader
than the measure of man's mind;
and the heart of the Eternal
is most wonderfully kind.

But we make his love too narrow
By false limits of our own
And we magnify his strictures
With a zeal He will not own.

If our love were but more simple,
we should take him at his word;
and our life would be all gladness
for the goodness of the Lord.

Amen.

Trinity 18 AMHC

Proper 23, Trinity 18
Bonsall HC

Amos 5:6-7,10-15
Hebrews 4:12-16
Mark 10:17-31

I'd quite like to win the lottery. I'd buy a nice cottage with some land for growing fruit and vegetables, I'd make sure I could support it, I'd buy myself some nice vestments because, darlings, they are so lovely, and I think I'd give the rest away – some perhaps to Bonsall church so you could have a good time arguing about what to spend it on.

I wonder, are these wicked thoughts, in light of today's gospel? The rich man who was told he had to sell all his possessions must have been rather cheated off: he was a good chap who did all the right things, so to be told by Jesus that more was required in order to inherit eternal life must have been a bit of a blow – too much to bear in fact.

It is easy to interpret this story as if riches and possessions are inherently bad. And given that I am not one of the world's wealthy people, it would be rather nice to point the finger at those who are, in a begrudging kind of way. But Jesus was not averse to extravagance – anointing, wine, - and the instruction to give to the poor is based on the assumption that we have something to give. So the more I reflect on this story, I think that it is wealth and possessions in themselves that are bad.

Jesus has instructed the man to give up riches and possessions because the man in the story **was** rich and **had** many possessions – they were things dear to him.

I think the point of the story is that to inherit eternal life we need to shed the things that are most dear to us, whatever they may be – and in this case it happened to be riches and possessions.

Think a moment about things that are dear to us. These might be hobbies that govern how we live our lives. Such as

- physical exercise, people who are addicted to running, or going to the gym.
- Or football mania.
- Or shopping.
- Any kind of addiction.
- It could even be church – e.g. insistence that only one form of service, or words, was the right one.

Think about such obsessions for a moment. It is easy to let them consume us, to allow them to take over ourselves, often with harmful effects on our families. These are things that we think we need, but are, in fact, things that keep us anchored at a certain stage of our development, at a certain stage of life.

Such attachments can even be to people. To parents – you know the story of the 40 year old unmarried man who takes his clothes to mammy to be washed. This is a kind of abuse – of each by the other. The attachment prevents the man from taking responsibility for himself, and equally is

unhealthy for the mother – she finds it difficult to accept that her little boy has grown up, and difficult to move on from the role of suffocating mother.

There's nothing intrinsically wrong with these things – exercise, shopping, football, looking after your family – but it's easy to let them corrode us and govern our lives. And when this happens we limit ourselves. We stop looking outwards to others, and instead simply look inwards to the whatever-it-is-that we are allowing to control us.

In my case, attachments to

- books
- to being a musician
- and for part of my life when I was a member of a gym to exercise

These were badges of membership of clubs that I thought I wanted to belong to, and these 'clubs' and these attitudes limited me and adversely affected the relationships I had with those around me. For example,

- wasting money
- putting these things before the needs of family
- affecting holidays and so on.

So what I think Jesus is saying here is that we must liberate ourselves from these immoderate attachments – things that we might see as riches and possessions, but things that in fact tether us. Liberation is, after all, the Christian gospel. Freeing us from the ties that bind.

We hear that no-one can follow Jesus without renouncing family. This is not, I think, an instruction to fall out with family and never see them again, but is an instruction not to let family ties govern us and limit us – it is a command really to grow up, and not be dependent on any one else – to take responsibility for ourselves, and keep with us only the stuff that we need for the immediate future rather than things that once mattered but do so no longer.

If we don't, we limit ourselves.

We see this in medicine. All illness, the Buddhists say, and I think they are largely right, stems from one of three things: closed-mindedness, over attachments and hatred, and in a sense these are all idols that have to be renounced., all stemming from attachments. Attachments that can limit us because they prevent us from doing something. Such an in-turning, some say, is one of the reasons that some people might get cancer – the worrying 'cancer' personality type, or heart attacks – from stress brought on by worrying because things aren't going the way you think they should.

We need to let go of trying to control the future – we never can. We need to let go of hurts from the past – it is right and necessary to grieve, for grieving then frees us – but think of Miss Havisham as an example of someone who limits herself by not letting go of events from the past.

And have an open mind for the future. Spring clean your mind as some of you spring clean your houses (or used to). Fling out the rubbish. This can be hard work, and requires some digging down into the depths to see what is there, again as anyone knows who has any experience of counselling or psychotherapy. This is Jesus' message. And that it is also sound psychology comes as no surprise, since as Carl Jung pointed out over and over again, Jesus' message is spot-on accurate for psychological health.

And this really is the message of the OT lesson from Amos in which he tells us that the powerful and wealthy will be damned for using their riches for their own personal gain rather than to help the poor and needy. They will be damned because they will damn themselves by limiting themselves. And that is what will happen to us – our souls will shrivel up and we will have limited ourselves. We will not be free to make the most of our lives. We will damn ourselves.

The Archdeacon of Chesterfield recently gave me a definition of sin that I thought wonderful – sin is 'a life unlived' – that is, not living to our full capabilities. Sin is the opposite of freedom. Attachments limit our lives. They **insulate** us and **isolate** us from the possibilities of the present.

If we want to be liberated, to have eternal life, we must renounce the ties that limit and bind us. So then rather than use our gifts and skills for the maintenance of things that hinder our growth, we are free to point them outwards for the enrichment of creation.

Amen

Trinity 18 PMEv

Trinity 18, Evensong WW

Joshua 5:13-6:20

Matthew 11:20-30

The Joshua lesson tells us the well known story about the walls that came tumbling down.

I remember the walls coming tumbling down from Sunday school, and thinking, as a child, yes but so what. You can see I was a bolshie child. And I must be frank with you when I tell you that until preparing for tonight I had never again given that story another thought – for over 40 years. And so I read the lesson and thought, Oh good grief – what is all that about – and then, after reflecting on the lessons for this morning and this evening, it hit me.

And so boys and girls I'm going to tell you what I think it's all about.

This morning's gospel was the story of the rich man who had kept all the rules, but of whom more was required if he was to enter the kingdom of Heaven. And in his case he was required to give up wealth and possessions. This is so often read as condemnation of wealth and possessions, but I don't think that is its primary purpose. It's main message is that we really must give up those things that we hold most dear – things that we are unhealthily dependent on – obsessions, addictions, props from the past that tether us to people or things.

And the same message comes to me in Jesus instructions to turn our backs on our families – not that we fall out with them and never see them again, but that we stop being dependent on them. We have to grow up and be responsible for ourselves.

A rather crude example of ties that bind us is Miss Havisham – grief that she chose to let herself stop growing.

Or the classical picture of the miser who is gnarled and knobbly because he refuses to give up his obsession – Mr Burns

Or the witch in Hansel and Gretel who wanted to consume the children rather than let them grow free – how many children suffer emotional abuse in this way from parents who can't let them go?

or of course Gollum.

Such things become barriers around us. We adopt roles to accord with these barriers. We put on masks that hide our true selves. And they become the equivalents of the man's riches that he must give up. In order to enter the kingdom of heaven we have to get rid of these things, to become naked before God.

This is liberation – which is salvation, the Christian message. It is spiritual nakedness.

Now do you see the significance of the walls of Jericho tumbling down? Jericho then becomes naked before the troops of God.

The city is described as being enclosed. Another word is insulated, which almost is isolated. Possessions and attitudes isolate us from God and the world, and insulate us against the outside. It might feel good to be in a castle with all the doors closed, but it is very solipsistic, inturned, the opposite of community, of all of us being part of the mystical body.

And we all know that the more possessions we have, the greater our concern for their safety. We must divest ourselves of all this crap – rubbish.

So that is what the Jericho story is all about.

When we do this, we find ourselves totally dependent on God – we need faith and hope for this. And faith and hope are often in short supply – it is one of the things that I most need to pray for. And when I go to confession as I do a few times a year the lack of faith and trust is one of the things I most need absolution for.

And so in Matthew we hear about being utterly dependent on god.

You will soon be getting the message that I keep banging on about how Christ is present in us all. Like a pilot light. He wants to turn up the dial so that the fire comes full on

There let it for thy glory burn with inextinguishable blaze

But we keep stopping the dial being turned up

Absolute dependence on God requires that we stop resisting. We let the divine God within fill our skins.

Absolute dependence on God means being like children – or rather, as unlike suspicious adults as it is possible to be. We need to let the scars that surround us, shed the skins of suspicion that have grown up around us as a result of the experiences of the world inherently sinful, or if you prefer, an imperfect world.

Yoke is easy – yes it is us. Elsewhere Jesus says it is difficult to do it, but when you have done it you go about with a new spring in your step

Picking off a scar – takes a while to get at it, but then it comes off suddenly and it is one of satisfactions of life

Stop resisting Christ within turning up his pilot light.

How

Self examination

Seeing the idols that have sustained you

Hobbies

Books

Exercise

Liturgical practices

But be in no doubt that the Christ within is wanting you to cooperate with him

Now, to finish with, I want to spread a wonderful meal before you.

Let me read a poem to you that says this so wonderfully

Psalm 40 I waited patiently for the Lord

Expectans expectavi

Charles Hamilton Sorley 1895-1915

Expectans Expectavi

(May, 1915)

From morn to midnight, all day through,
I laugh and play as others do,
I sin and chatter, just the same
As others with a different name.

And all year long upon the stage,
I dance and tumble and do rage
So vehemently, I scarcely see
The inner and eternal me.

I have a temple I do not
Visit, a heart I have forgot,
A self that I have never met,
A secret shrine—and yet, and yet

This sanctuary of my soul
Unwitting I keep white and whole,
Unlatched and lit, if Thou should'st care
To enter or to tarry there.

With parted lips and outstretched hands
And listening ears Thy servant stands,
Call Thou early, call Thou late,
To Thy great service dedicate.

**Expectans expectavi. Call Thou early, call Thou late, to Thy great service dedicate.
Come Lord Jesus!**

Amen

Trinity 19

Proper 24, Trinity 19

October 22

Brassington, Middleton MP

Isaiah 53:4-12

Hebrews 5:1-12

Mark 10:35-45

We lived 16 years in Dublin, and one of the great Dublin institutions is that twice a year, in Passiontide and at Christmas, all Dublin seems to be performing or listening to Handel's *Messiah*. You can, I can tell you, get sick of it. The reason is that the oratorio was first performed there in 1742 when Dublin was indubitably the second city of the British Empire. One of its most famous and moving arias, and one that sticks in the memory, is *He was despised and rejected, acquainted with grief*, and it concerns the theme of today's Isaiah where the servant bears our sufferings, tormented, tortured for our sakes.

And this theme of suffering servant is one that comes out again in Marks' gospel. Jesus gets rather cross with James and John. They really think that Jesus is going to reign in honour and splendour and they ask to be sat next to him. But he tells them quite sharply that while such ambitions might be appropriate to this world, if they really insist on sitting alongside him, they will suffer and die.

And then he introduces the word diakonos – service.

First I want to look at the word service

- This is not slavery, despite what many will say, but service. Diakonh could be used of one who furnishes, supplies, conveys messages.
- Servants are, in their own way, very influential. Those who serve us in shops are quite often the people we talk to. They hear a lot, and can make soothing noises, they can give gentle advice, and their comments can influence us greatly.
- How many of you have heard of Jeeves and Wooster? Bertie Wooster might well have been the employer, but there is no doubting who had the influence.
- Servants do not seek power and rank, but they are very influential. So that is one point I want you to take home.

Now what about suffering?

- There are Christians who suffer for their faith in spectacular fashion. Christians in Sudan. Christians in countries governed corruptly where they can see that government policy is unjust – Zimbabwe for example, at the moment.
- In my last job I sometimes found myself in the role of loyal dissenter. This kind of suffering servanthood at work is common to many of us – we see something that is wrong, and we must risk an adverse reaction if we point it out. To criticise or question the Pharisees is a lonely job.
- All this is prophecy. We need prophets. We need look no further back than the twentieth century to see what happens when prophets are silenced. Germany. Now WMD, Kelly. The Head of the Army today condemned for his prophecy about a war that is to my mind impossible to justify.
- Jesus was both spiritual and revolutionary – two sides of the same coin and such people ask real, often painful and upsetting questions to show what the true situation really is. This certainly involves suffering – it is never easy to go against the grain.

I give these examples to show that Christian discipleship may bring suffering, mocking, even death, when we stand by our Christian principles rather than deny them, as Peter did. But I want to go deeper still.

Jesus has given us guidelines about what we need to do to follow him, and we've heard some of them in the readings over the last few weeks.

- Open like children
- Family
- Rich man
- All signals that we need to take responsibility for ourselves and not be dependent on others, on old obsessions, or use people or relationships as crutches, as ties that bind and tether us to the past.

As you get to know me better you'll realise that I have only one message really, and it's that we all have Christ within – the divine core. That's the point of the Incarnation and Pentecost, to divinize human life. It's a frequent theme in Holy Scripture that we begin to get glimpses of God when we truly know ourselves. And this is the theme of much psychology too: know yourself, and you begin to get glimpses of the divine within.

This kind of discovery comes only through self-examination. And for me this involves distressing internal turmoil. Getting to know myself involves soul-searching, the discarding of images from the past, discarding the expectations of others and the exposure of childhood hurts to the cold light of day so that they can then wither away. And however far down I go, it always seems that I have never reached the bottom of the barrel. There is always more.

I need to be become spiritually naked, to see right down into the core.

Susan Howatch

It is very difficult work. This really is suffering, but the insights it yields can be truly cathartic. It's like climbing a hill in thick fog and on stony rocks. But suddenly the clouds clear and the view is stunning. It is worth it.

Harry Williams

So here is another image of suffering that we all endure.

Not just suffering at the hands of others, but also suffering at our own hands. And is not this exactly similar to Jesus' suffering: he was despised, rejected and reviled by others, but he also voluntarily and willingly went into this suffering and, in a sense, brought it upon himself. **It is this second kind of suffering that I think is more difficult to work through. And we cannot avoid it.**

The Hebrews lesson tells us that the suffering Christ becomes the great High Priest, and through this kind of work, we are become priests – we all have the divine spark within us, and we all can be channels and representatives of God and Jesus. My job as a Clerk in Holy orders is to enable you all to see that, and to empower you to act on it.

And if you doubt what it's for – and I do – you might recall Churchill's words during the second world war: suffering blood sweat tears, but then glory.

Summing up today's ramble

- So I think the gospel message today is that to seek rank and position like James and John is not the Christian way.
- Rather, we must serve as we think is right, aware that it may well bring suffering
- We will get glimpses of God through seek spiritual nakedness before God,
- This certainly will bring suffering.
- But at least then we will be able to live with ourselves, and we will begin to get glimpses of Christ-likeness.

Mother Theresa gave us some pointers which may help

- People are often unreasonable, illogical or self-centred. Forgive them anyway.
- If you are successful, you will be sure to make some false friends and some true enemies. Be successful anyway.
- If you are honest and frank, people may cheat you. Be honest and frank anyway.
- What you spend years building, someone could destroy overnight. Build anyway.
- If you find serenity and happiness others may be jealous. Be happy anyway.
- The good you do today people will often forget tomorrow. Be good anyway.
- Give the world the best you have and it may never be good enough. Give the world the best you've got anyway.
- You see, in the final analysis it is between you and God. It was never between you and them anyway.

Trinity 20 AMMP

Proper 25, Trinity 20 (last)

29 October 2007

Idridgehay MP

Jeremiah 31:7-9

Hebrews 7:23-28

Mark 10:46-52

On Tuesday last week, I had just finished lunch when the phone rang. On the other end was a man whose son died on that day last year aged 18 in a road accident. He and his family were in church and wanted to light some candles to mark the event. Could I tell him where the candles were. I asked hi if he would like me to come and be with them, and they said yes. So off I went. I found the box if small candles, and lit the altar candles while the family arranged 9 or 10 small candles on the altar and stood holding hands in remembrance and shared grief. I knelt behind them and prayed quietly but audibly, giving thanks for the man's life and the joy he brought, and asked for comfort for the grieving family, and for the soul of the young man.

It was the most moving thing I've done so far in my curacy, for a number of reasons, some of which are that they wanted to do it, that they wanted me to join them, that they were so obviously moved, and that they were so obviously thankful that I'd joined them. And of course, the accidental death of a young person must always be one of the most difficult things that a family and a clergyman has to deal with.

Ask and it will be granted.

Bartimaeus asked and it was granted.

There are two significant parts of this story, to my mind.

- The first is that B had to ask. Jesus knew that B was blind, but Jesus didn't do anything until B had asked for help.
- And the second is that B knew exactly what he wanted. He didn't ask for anything less. He didn't just ask that he might come to terms with blindness – a reasonable enough request you'd think. He asked for healing, and he got it. There's a lesson there. We can be up front and ask for exactly what it is we want. There is no need to think 'oh I'll not ask for the whole thing, because I might be disappointed if I only get part of it'. Bartimaeus asked for what he wanted.

We need to know what it is we want, and then ask for it.

The same message comes from the Jeremiah lesson too. Yahweh God **tells** the Israelites to ask for salvation, assistance. He actually **tells** them to ask, almost as if he waits to act until he's asked.

There is something deeply authentic in human terms about this. We have to recognize our own needs before we are in a position to ask them to be granted. Prayer unlocks God's purpose within us, and makes us more singleminded about our real aims.

Here is a rather crude illustration. If I give you a present, let's say some mountaineering equipment, you won't thank me for it unless you happen to be a mountaineer. And since none of you is, that present will be useless and might well be resented. I know well enough that a gift is made a gift only if recipient recognises it as such. I am not grateful for something I don't want – and that was always how I felt as a child, and still do, when I'm given something as a surprise – I want my gifts to be things I want.

And it's the same with this story. God, I think, wants us to recognise what it is we lack – not what we need – these are different things. I might think I need a new coat, but I don't **lack** it – the old one is serviceable enough. But mere recognition is not enough for them to be met. Jesus wants us to realise what it is we lack, and ASK that they be fulfilled. Then as Jesus made Bartimaeus see, so will we see more clearly how to deal with what it is we lack.

This has something to do with the fact that God wants us to be responsible about our own situation and needs. Holy Scripture read over the last few weeks gives out this message.

- We need to nurture our relationships with care, as I told you when I was here last.
- In the parable of the rich man trying to enter the kingdom of heaven, we heard the message that we need to give up the things we hold most dear – riches in his case, but it could be attitudes, or practices, or anything that keeps our attention focussed inwards on ourselves instead of outwards to others and the world.
- In the various instructions of Jesus to give up our families, we hear the same message – not to fall out with our relatives, but rather to stop being dependent on them and making them dependent on us – in other words, to be responsible for ourselves and let others be responsible for themselves.

These things are very difficult to do, and in trying to do them, we need to become dead to the old life and embrace the new – the resurrection story. This is what the cross and resurrection is all about.

There is an old joke that I rather like

Psychiatrists and light bulbs

But there is great psychological truth in it, and that is exactly what the parable of Bartimaeus is saying to me. We have no chance of getting what we want until (a) our eyes have been opened to what it is that we lack, and (b) we have asked for it.

You may say that so often our prayers go unanswered – and yes, I feel like that too sometimes. It may be, of course, that they are answered – in ways that we don't recognize. But I also wonder if in fact the problem is that we haven't got to the bottom of the problem and asked for the right thing. Remember, Bartimaeus asked for what he really really wanted. He knew he was blind. There was no pretence about him, he knew what he lacked, he had assessed the issue correctly. This places a great burden on us in prayer and intercession. We need to do some serious self-examination in

order to recognize our weaknesses and things we lack, and that is hard work – crucifixion of the old, and resurrection in the new. But the rewards can be healing.

And as far as today's message is concerned, asking for healing for ourselves requires that we recognize what it is that needs healing. In the case of the young man's family, they were not asking for anything for him: he was at peace. But they were asking for healing for themselves. I don't know whether they got it – but they looked as if they did. They had experienced the emptiness of the cross, they had passed through the three days of recognizing what it is they wanted in terms of healing, and I suggest, the very act of asking for it, or doing something about it, was for them a resurrection. And healing does not mean necessarily that the former circumstances are restored, but that we come to terms with them, or at least become more at ease with them.

To anyone who is suffering from illness, or distress, this is indeed gospel - good news.

Amen.

Reference to Hebrews lesson if this is a Eucharist (not today)

Former priests limited by life and time and space

Now, as priest for ever, he is eternal

Melchisedech is a theophany, a type of eternal Christ

- **B was BOLD, we should be BOLD**
- **Jesus waits for us to see what we need.**
- **B was not slow to ASK, we should not be slow to ASK**
- **We too easily tolerate what we shouldn't**

Trinity 20 PMEv

Trinity 20 (Last)

WW Evensong

Ecclesiastes 11,12

2 Timothy 2:1-7

I am put in mind this week and this evening of texts from anthems that I sung or played when I was a musician at Carlisle Cathedral and chapels and churches in Cambridge and London.

First, some words from the prophet Habakkuk, set to music by Charles Villiers Stanford.

For lo, I raise up that bitter and **hasty nation**, which **march thro' the breadth of the earth, to possess the dwelling places that are not theirs**. They are terrible and dreadful, **their judgment and dignity proceed from themselves**. Their horses also are swifter than leopards, and are more fierce than the evening wolves, and their horsemen spread themselves, yea, their horsemen come from far. **They fly as an eagle that hasteth to devour, they come all of them for violence**; their faces are set as the east wind, and they gather captives as the sand. Yea, he scoffeth at kings, and princes are a derision unto him. For he heapeth up dust and taketh it. Then shall he sweep by as a wind that shall pass over and be guilty, even he whose might is his God.

Does that put you in mind of any particular happenings on the world stage at the moment? Or nationally?

Repeat words in bold

That passage speaks to me of international politics, of national politics, and even of institutional politics – certainly of the institution for which I no longer work.

It speaks to me of cancellation of debt agreements that are, in fact, agreements opening the so-called beneficiaries to US trade.

I could go on, but I'll be chastised for talking politics.

And it speaks to me of pride and arrogance of those who think they know best, of those who ignore and trample on the feelings of others. I am certainly not one of those who think that Holy Scripture contains magical coded references to future events: I do not go in for hidden messages. There is no need. Human nature it seems has not changed at all in 2600 years since that passage was written. When pride and hubris and arrogance possess the human soul, we see the same effects now as

then. And perhaps the saddest thing is that on the contemporary international stage, those who **march thro' the breadth of the earth, to possess the dwelling places that are not theirs**, are those that call themselves Christians.

But it need not be so. For individuals like you and me there are self-help books abounding in the shops: and people buy these and are amazed at the wisdom contained in them. And if they cared to look in Holy Scripture they could find, if they were so minded, the Wisdom literature in what we call both the OT and the Apocrypha. And they would have no need of self help books by the latest fashionable guru, whoever it may be, for it is all there in Proverbs, in Ecclesiastes, in Wisdom and so on.

We heard in the first lesson instructions to give alms, to do our best with the resources we have, to enjoy life while we can. Follow the inclination of your heart and the desire of your eyes – but be prepared to b joyful.

make most of what you have. Talents

don't be limited

tie in with riches, family etc

be open to god

But – and this is what those who **march thro' the breadth of the earth, to possess the dwelling places that are not theirs**, and all their misguided associates might remember, is that while we are doing whatever it is we are doing, we might do well to remember what will surely happen to us some day. Inexorably for some, suddenly for others, but happen it will. Vanity of vanities saith the preacher, all is vanity, emptiness. Earth to earth, dust to dust and ashes to ashes. In the words of on Ilkley moor bar tat, the worms will come and eat thee up.

What did this writer Qoholeth mean by vanity.

Hebrew hebel means vapour, thin air, pointlessness, futility,

In this case, this is a prosperous man writing – and yet even his prosperity brings no guarantee of fulfilment.

Look at today. People pursue

- Money, but feel unfulfilled.
- Possessions, but feel unfulfilled.
- Good looks, but feel unfulfilled.
- Even pain relief in illness, but feel unfulfilled. What is the point of pain relief from one condition to die a few weeks or months later of something else?

Oh that people would read learn and inwardly digest the wisdom literature.

So you might ask, what exactly is wisdom?

The Greek word for wisdom is Sophia, and that's the one I'm using. In Scripture it's not just a set of instructions, but almost a substance. In Proverbs 8 it's like a gas existing before creation, or stardust of which the universe is made, existing outside time.

- We read of the spirit of wisdom being with God at creation, the mediator between Yahweh and cosmos linking the Godhead with the tangible world we live in.
- We read of sophia being intermediate between God and creation.
- We read of radiant wisdom striding through creation, born of God and rejoicing in the created world. Rejoicing in the created world.
- We read of sophia described as Olive tree, rosebud, cinnamon, fragrant balm, incense, sweet spices, sparkling rivulet. Beautiful imagery.

We read of sophia as part of divine revelation.

- In Job 28, wisdom is hidden. Mortals do not know the way to wisdom: only God understands it.
- In Proverbs, Yahweh makes it accessible to mortals: in fact, the love that God bears for creation makes God want the best for us, so Wisdom is available to all who will heed it.
- Then the Song of Songs is the final step with (apparently) no mention of Yahweh, though many commentators have assumed that Yahweh is one of the participants in the erotic action.

Sophia is the 'the principle which orders and determines the world for the divine self-imparting which is evinced in redemption.' Schleiermacher
That sentence includes **order** (logos) and **God's agent of redemption** (Jesus).
Sophia on a par with logos (John 1) and Jesus.

So here we have the sophia concept as a link to the Incarnation. The prologue of John must be a derivation of Proverbs 8. It presents a pre-existent *something* that is the agent of creation, to which we testify in Jesus the Christ. It resonates with Hebrews and Colossians where Christ is both creator and first-born.

- **So, Sophia is personified as the ideal specimen of humanity, the divine specimen of humanity, Jesus Christ, the example by which we aim to live our lives.**
- **Sophia soaking the cosmos like a gas that we can breathe in if we are prepared to receive it.**

Perhaps this link with the Incarnation is why this passage from Ecclesiastes is set for this day which in the new lectionary is regarded by some as the last Sunday of Trinity, before the Sundays before Christmas. And in the BCP it is set for stir-up Sunday, five Sundays before Christmas.

This wisdom is very practical advice. It is **right reason**.

We need **right reason** to discern the right thing to do. The correct use of our rational processes is exactly what the wisdom literature is telling us to do.

Sophia, right reason, spirit, logos, Son of God, Jesus, love.
Sophia is God in action. But God is love, so God is wisdom.
Sophia, you might say, is love of love.

Oh how I fail. How I fail, how we fail, to heed words of wisdom. Only the discerning see all. And, speaking personally, this discernment is not always easy to come by. 'Our reason is overwhelmed by so many forms of deceptions ... that it is far from directing us aright.' (Calvin). Those unwilling to make a spiritual commitment to Wisdom will distort her truthful speech, but to those that are, Wisdom brings all her benefits. Love of love.

That's why the lesson of Timothy is so important
Endure hardship
Discipline, single-mindedness
Obedience self denial struggle
V 2 – this is for all – there is no partiality

Let me take time to meditate and tune into wisdom, cosmic rays soaking the universe. Cosmic rays soaking my body. Claud Bernard a 19th century physiology talked of the *le milieu intérieur*. Sophia is *le milieu divin* that can rehydrate our wilting spirits, if we let it.
And there is sophia, too, coming from the Christ-within, if only I will be still and listen to it.

Tune into our inner selves, the wisdom that comes from meditation and study of Holy Scripture in humility and without pride. Tune into the wisdom that soaks the universe.

If there was more application of wisdom – love of love, there might be some chance that nations and people might become less **bitter and hasty, and stop marching thro' the breadth of the earth, stop possessing the dwelling places that are not theirs**, stop being terrible and dreadful, and begin to exercise **judgment and dignity that proceeds from wisdom – that is, from love of love**.

The world certainly needs sophia.

Amen.