

Sermon preached at King's College Cambridge

Sunday September 27th

We're at a production of the James Baldwin play *The Amen Corner* set in Harlem in 1953. There is a single stage set, in two storeys. The upper storey is a storefront Pentecostal church; the lower storey a basement tenement flat where the pastor, Sister Margaret, lives with her 18-year-old son and her older sister. The action is set at a crucial moment, a crisis point. Sr Margaret is a passionate and strong-willed woman, domineering and fervent and uncompromising in her teaching. She's been the sole pastor to this little community for maybe ten years. Her son, David, is getting itchy feet to go out into the world and make it as a musician; but he daren't tell his ma because that's what their father did – the father she says left them, high on liquor and worse, a fine example of the evils of jazz and drink.

But then, ten or fifteen minutes in, the husband, Luke, comes back – a wreck of a man, wracked with final stages of TB. And so the rest of the play sees the unravelling of everything Sr Margaret has built up. We see some elders of the church murmuring and plotting to depose her: scenes of brilliant dark comedy – nasty back-biting dressed up in pious sentiment (a phenomenon not confined to 1950s Harlem). We discover that in fact Margaret left Luke, taking their son with her – he didn't abandon them. And as things open up we discover too that what caused all this was actually a horrible tragedy, and her husband's inability to cope with it – a stillbirth. The horror of giving birth to a dead child, and Luke's hiding in drink, had led Margaret to a conversion: she seized hold of faith in Jesus, and in the power of the Holy Ghost (as they then said), and constructed a whole new life of pure, Pentecostal devotion.

But as Margaret faces the mounting, censorious disloyalty of the elders – 'she lied, she left him, now she has that sinful man in her place' sums it up – so she also dares to remember what was good about her early life with her husband. It was a gutsy, earthy love; and she has never, in the end, stopped loving him. As she realises she might lose her son too, just in time she pulls back towards him. In the very final scene, the last thing she says to him, as she holds him, dying in her arms, is *if we could only start again*.

But the play doesn't end here.

She goes up to the church to face her tormentors. Her passion and spirit are unbowed, but she has something new to tell them:

Children. I'm just now finding out what it means to love the Lord. It ain't all in the shouting and the singing. It ain't all in the reading of the Bible. It ain't even - it ain't even – in running all over everybody to get to heaven. To love the Lord is to love all his children – all of them, everyone! – and suffer with them and rejoice with them and never count the cost!

And while her opponents take this as final proof of her dereliction, she goes back down to the lifeless Luke, kneeling by his bed. Fade to blackout.

In the end Sr Margaret's faithful fervour seemed to be just like spun sugar. In the heat of a crisis, it melted. Her fervour needed to be earthed.

To be earthed is about humility, about knowing we are on and of the soil, the humus. If ever there was a holy man who knew this, to our everlasting benefit, it was the saint whose day actually falls today – S Vincent de Paul; a remarkable priest-saint of 17th century France whose love of the poorest around him became legendary in his own lifetime. He knew that *we* must be humble, because of the world-turning humility that brought *God* among us, Immanuel, Jesus. Out of the divine humility came an inexhaustible love and mercy embodied, *embodied* in Jesus.

And he calls across the centuries, calls us our better selves – which is to say, our real selves – to share his passion for the messy reality of human life. He dares us to have just a fraction of his care for those around us who have lost out or who are at a loss.

At the heart of this is a conviction: that we can be humble, be earthed, because the earth, the very dust from which we are made, is the stuff of divine creation. It is part of that whole web of being that we call the sacramental. The physical world itself speaks of God. And in the coming of Jesus, the very physicality of our life is infused with divine life. Out of this springs the Church, and at its heart, what we are doing now - gathered at a holy table.

And so our earthly life is crackling with the sparks of heaven; the stubble of daily life can daily be set ablaze with the purifying, life-giving fire of divine mercy. And our job – the job of all of us – is to fan that flame. And it's gloriously real.

This reality, this deep love of the stuff that God loves into life, even allows us to take comfort quite literally from the man, Vincent himself. This is a tiny fragment of St Vincent himself. There is comfort and strength in this because of that earthy faith we are bidden and bound to have. Here is a fragment of the man himself, the man irradiated with humility - and grace. The man whose prayers we need and whose passion we should imitate.

Or, as Sr Margaret in Harlem puts it:

To love the Lord is to love all his children – all of them, everyone! – and suffer with them and rejoice with them and never count the cost!