

## Sermon preached at King's College Cambridge

October 11<sup>th</sup> 2015

'Be nice!' someone cries. An exasperated father to his children, fighting again on the weekend that they stay with him. A lover knocked back by less than lovely behaviour from the grumpy other. The maitre d' attempting a quickfire encouragement to waiters at their wits' end with rude diners.

What about this word 'nice' then? For many the word 'nice' doesn't have much depth or seriousness to it; it's not important enough to be classed as a virtue. And, as we all know, there are plenty of people who seem nice, but are actually far from virtuous. The niceness is just a front.

This happens to be very important to me. I remember a quite specific moment when I was 14, sitting in an English lesson, and suddenly thinking to myself, 'why can't I just be nice to people?' I'd had five or six years of being hugely unpredictable and difficult, often very anti-social. I was nearly expelled from school at one point. I wasn't violent or aggressive, just very mouthy and someone who would never join in. Actually, when I look back, I think I was just very fearful. I was picked on rather a lot, and much mocked. It left me with a body language which I struggle to compensate for even now – a jut of the chin, nose in the air.

Now I make no claims at all for my success in trying to be nice. Just ask my friends! But from that moment as a thin-skinned fourteen-year-old, the need to be nice has ebbed and flowed in my life as a motif, a moral motif.

There is a novel called 'The Nice and the Good', by that great English writer of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Iris Murdoch. Like so many of her books it is piercingly perceptive. She was a philosopher, *and* a great anatomist of the human heart. The novel is at heart about the difference between being nice and being good. One character, Theo, comes to understand this in himself at the end of the book:

*I am sunk in the wreck of myself, thought Theo. I live in myself like a mouse inside a ruin... Theo had begun to glimpse the distance which separates the nice from the good, and the vision of this gap had terrified his soul... Even the best that he was, was connected with possessive, self-filling human love. That blank demand implied the death of his whole being.* [pp359-360]

There is a truth here which we recognise, even in Iris Murdoch's highly-coloured characterisation. Pleasantness, kind words and helpful deeds can all be a veneer, masking someone's real, much less admirable, motives.

This is viciously addressed by a character in another great English novel, 'Brideshead Revisited'. The exotic Anthony Blanche warns Charles Ryder, the book's protagonist, against being taken in by the beautiful but doomed Sebastian Flyte, taken in by his exquisite charm. He says,

*[Sebastian] has a kind word for everyone, you see; he has such charm.* [p51]

We've all experienced disingenuous niceness, misleading charm; but there is a word there which points towards the virtue of niceness. That word is kind. 'Sebastian has a kind word for everyone.'

Kindness is how niceness becomes a virtue. And so we can make a fundamental distinction, one Anthony Blanche, cynical and unkind as he is, is ignorant of. There is a crucial difference between niceness as charm, and niceness as kindness. And the crux lies in this: charm is when I am nice for my own sake. Kindness is when I am nice for the other person's sake.

The writer of the Letter to the Ephesians knew this:

*Be ye kind one to another, tender-hearted, forgiving.*

*Ephesians 4.32*

There is more to this, of course. Niceness as charm can vary. It might simply be selfish manipulation of another, a tactic to win someone over to your will. Or it might be more subtle, where you're not so much damaging another person as damaging yourself. This is charm to get people to like you. Sometimes this is a survival tactic, arising from low self-esteem; and it can often be quite unconsciously done. We should be really careful before leaping to judgment on this. But we need to be honest about it too, especially where we see it in ourselves. And, to put it at its simplest: part of coming to know, deep in your heart, how much God loves you, is coming to love the you that God loves so much.

For any particular person this will usually be complicated, messy and hard to be cut-and-dried about. In *Brideshead* Sebastian Flyte eventually crashes out of polite society into a life of addictions, and dies in Morocco, a seedy, tragic alcoholic's death. But we're left feeling profoundly sorry for him; he seems to be the product of a selfish, dysfunctional family which has failed to understand and nurture a fragile personality. His way of coping has been to win people over by being nice to them. Are we just going to dismiss that as false, as meaningless?

There is a temptation in the moral life to think that what we do is infinitely more important than how we do it. It can be difficult to love your neighbour sometimes, especially if the other person is awkward or unpleasant. Sometimes, maybe even often, the challenge of doing the right thing by another person can seem like quite enough moral effort, without having to be nice with it.

But I think Jesus asks us to be more ambitious. *Take my yoke upon you*, he says [Matt 11.29] *and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart*. As we rest our own burdens in the loving heart of Jesus, so he gives us the heart to bear the needs of others: a burden that can become light when it is shouldered with gentleness and humility. Or look at the father of the Prodigal Son, who takes back his boy not just with a dutiful handshake - but by running out to him with a heart full of love and eyes full of tears. Jesus asks of us a quality of graciousness which goes beyond the purely mechanical, beyond just doing the right thing.

There is, of course, a mechanics of virtue, so to speak; or, to use a different image, a regime. Each of us, to varying degrees, has to practise doing the right thing in each moment. And the more we manage to do it, praise God, the more we get into the habit of it. We are exercising the moral muscle - our heart. It's ethical exercise. And this is down to the grace of God, which is the energy in our every effort to do the right thing.

But also, actually, let's just try to do the right thing *graciously*. In other words, try to do the right thing kindly.... dare I say, nicely. That's gracious in the ordinary way we use the word. But it's a Trojan horse of a word, because hidden inside it is the truth that it is the grace of God which makes it possible and fruitful. Through that grace we can give our right actions a quality. Not a superficial charm, but a warmth, or tenderness, or passion which can apply salve to the woundedness of others; and which speaks of God's infinite love, infinite love for each of us, for all of us.