

Sermon King's College Chapel Christmas Day 2015

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What's the difference between a Christmas list and a bucket list?

A Christmas list is a catalogue of things you would like to have – or more precisely to be given. A bucket list is an inventory of things you would like to do before you die – or kick the bucket. When we are young we are more likely to draw up a Christmas list – but it's as we get older that the bucket comes into focus.

The two lists do have things in common as well as differences. In particular, both begin and end with me. A variety of scientific studies have shown that over the course of recent decades people have become ever more narcissistic. We refer to ourselves, think about ourselves, spend time and effort in adorning and presenting ourselves and in seeking the particular pleasures and privileges that we want for ourselves, far more than either we used to or our parents or grandparents ever did. The word 'me' has never had it so good.

There is a good side to this. Confident assertive people are likely to stand up for their rights and are less likely to be bullied. When we see or hear people demanding justice and fairness that they have been denied we should support them, and, if a bit of narcissism helps things along, that's all to the good.

The Christmas story is certainly one in which the themes of justice and liberation can be found, especially if one digs into the prophecies of Isaiah. The wonderful counsellor is the Mighty God who will sit on the throne of David and establish a

government that is characterised by justice and peace and righteousness. There is no reason why we should not want this, or work for it, or seek to make it happen, whether we are at the bottom of the pile or at the top. But ultimately this kingdom of God will be established not by human hands but by the zeal of the Lord. And yet if our tongues and hands and feet are inspired to justice by this godly zeal then we will undoubtedly be on the side of the angels. Even though we are not quite angels – and are all too easily distracted by our Christmas lists or our bucket lists, the cravings of greed and vanity, our weaknesses of anxiety and the desire for privilege and pleasure that all too often come between what we actually do and what in our best moments we really want to do.

It is for such reasons perhaps that the context of family is so important when we try to process the message of Christmas. ‘Charity begins at home’, they say. This is not a reason to spoil your kids, but a strong message about love. If you can’t love the people you spend time with, you probably can’t, really and truly, love anyone. Of course you can fantasize as much as you like about the love you long to share with someone remote – whether this is romantic or heroic love or merely economic largesse. But the deeper message of Christmas is not about justice and fairness – though that is part of it – but about love. And that’s why narcissism matters so much. Narcissism is the sort of self-love that makes the love of others difficult or impossible.

There is good self-love and there is bad self-love. Good self-love helps people to work hard and play hard. It is the basis of a good night’s sleep and of living life vocationally. We all get fed up with ourselves and our personal shortcomings from time to time; we all feel frustrated every now and again. And yet the story of a film that has become compulsory Christmas viewing for some, ‘It’s a Wonderful Life’, is a lesson in the right sort of

self-love. It reminds us that somehow or other we have made a positive difference; that we do matter; that we are part of a world where individuals who love really do make a difference.

Good self-love is all of a piece with good love of others. 'Love your neighbour as you love yourself', said Jesus in one of his more Zen-like moods. 'Love never ends', wrote St Paul. It is the nature of love to flow. You can't bottle it. There is no battery or reservoir of love. Jesus came to understand this before his death and set about training his disciples in the ways of love and commanded them to take bread and wine in remembrance of him and as fuel for the journey on the way of love.

A few days ago I was interviewing prospective theology students. One feature of the interviews was that they were all making connections between the study of religion and current affairs. That's not something that anyone would have foreseen fifty years ago. Rather they would have expected religion to have collapsed by now. Yet the sad truth is that the sort of religion that makes the headlines these days is far from being a means whereby people overcome their own narcissism and tap into God eternal and endless love. Rather we are seeing forms of feral religion across the globe – religion that has gone wild in some way, and become yet another means whereby the anxious seek to take control and the hate-filled find an excuse to violate, maim and murder.

It is a sad truth that there is nothing on this earth, nothing in human affairs, that is guaranteed *not* to go sour or stale or in some way corrupt. It has always been thus and it will ever be thus. Human beings are far from perfect except in one regard, and that is in finding ways to excuse ourselves of sins that will be obvious to those who will one day look at us with historical perspective. And even in that dubious skill we are not quite perfect, for we all recognize a narcissistic streak running

through us, just as we lament the barbarous streak that we see in others.

Our spiritual challenge, then, is to find a way of living out in our daily lives the love that has, for whatever reason, drawn us to this place today— despite the fact that we are narcissistic and anxious and would much prefer to focus on our Christmas list or our bucket list than – say – listen to a sermon, or ponder its implications.

The world is increasingly dominated by those who feel that the only sensible way to manage things is to switch off the imagination, close down our passion for truth and justice, and to limit the activities of others. Such is the mentality of desperate secularism and feral religion both at home and abroad.

It is not, however, the mentality that is reflected in the story of Bethlehem, the prophecies of Isaiah, or the celebration of Holy Communion. These all proclaim that God is love and that there is a way of life for us to adopt which is none other than love in action. Like all love it begins close to home, yet it ends not in the growth of personal pleasure but in a quality of self-giving so profound that our self-concerns disappear like snow in summer.

This is the way of life to which the child in the manger, the mother and the father seeking refuge in a stable, the shepherds and the wise men all bear witness. As they do so they shine with the light of truth and grace. We delight in that; and we delight and rejoice that we too are called to witness to that light: the light that lights up everyone who comes into the world, the light that shines in darkness and which darkness neither understands nor overcomes; the light that shows us how to love.