Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after Easter

King’s College Chapel

Readings: James 1.17-21; John 16.5-15

‘Life is God’s gift’. That’s a statement you’re likely to hear quite often, if you happen to wander into a church. It seems to have good biblical warrant: ‘every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights…’, says our first reading (Js 1.17). Yet, somewhere along the line, God tends to get transformed into a very generous benefactor: every jolly nice gift is from God. So, says a certain kind of prosperity gospel, thanks, God, for doubling my salary; thanks for getting me into King’s College Cambridge; and thanks for making my life go exactly as I wanted it to anyway.

But what happens if your life doesn’t quite turn out like that? What if the job, the salary, the privilege of great institutions, and the ebb and flow of quotidian existence just don’t go your way? Has God forgotten to turn up with his presents? Or is your life just not the kind of gift you were hoping for? Can you take it back for a refund, as someone asked me not that long ago, reflecting on a life that seemed to them to have been nothing but a series of unwanted, undeserved misfortunes?

I don’t intend to belittle a quite appropriate habit of giving thanks to God for life’s blessings, but simply to acknowledge that the very real difficulty and complexity of our lives must push us beyond a naïve and simplistic view of God as a celestial Santa Claus, handing out favours to his chosen ones. Indeed, it is precisely this attitude which tends to miss the importance of speaking about life as a gift in the first place.

There is a sense in which we absolutely must acknowledge life as a gift, and that is the sense in which we are here at all. The Christian doctrine of creation does not suggest that God is a talented craftsman, fashioning a perfectly ordered world from the raw material of chaos. Rather, the doctrine of creation simply points us to a relationship: we are, and need not have been. That anything is, is therefore dependent upon something that is not us, or any kind of contingent, created thing. It depends upon ‘that which all people call God’, in Thomas Aquinas’ famous phrase. Whatever the act of creation is – and, certainly, it is no kind of temporal process in any worldly sense – it involves a gracious bestowal of being, a calling-into-existence of something completely new, and unanticipated. It’s not a transaction, it’s not the realisation of some latent possibility, it’s not self-actualisation, it’s not a trade-off. No, it’s a gracious gift. God makes what is not God.
And God makes what is not God for its own sake, not his. Creation is a gift because it serves no particular function for God; it’s not an expedient transaction. God doesn’t ‘need’ us. That might sound heartless – and some theologians have suggested that this view perpetuates an aloof, severe, and inaccessible view of the divine, often linked to destructive notions of stoic, masculine autonomy, and power – but in fact the reverse is true. God creates us not out of any wish to ‘use’ or ‘exploit’ us, but, simply, for our own enjoyment and good. God intends us to flourish as creatures, to reach our proper end in participation in God’s own endless delight and joy.

So, life is a gift. But how does that change things? Life, after all, remains tough, difficult, and painful. There are moments when we might be inclined towards gratitude for the gift of existence, yet there are certainly moments when the opposite is true. Let me offer just two thoughts about how thinking about life as a gift makes a difference to our existence here and now.

Firstly, it is certainly not the case that life lived faithfully with God is necessarily blessed by material, human success or satisfaction, or perhaps even happiness. On the contrary, our Gospel reading this morning is taken from a passage in which Jesus warns the disciples that they will face discrimination and persecution, even death. The lives of the saints do not constitute a catalogue of happy, comfortable biographies – far from it. Yet those same saints teach us that life, in all its sorrows, can be lived conscious of the unending wellspring of love which is its source, with that sense of being held firm in love by what is not us, and – through all the shadows of grief and pain that might come our way – with the comfort, compassion, and endless invitation which is born of God’s movement of perfect self-giving goodness.

But secondly, if what is most fundamental to our lives is a movement of perfect, self-giving goodness, then this has some serious implications for what our lives are meant to be like. ‘Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures’ (1 Js 20), says our first reading. We are made by love, for love, to love. Insofar as we love, we live. What Jesus’ life shows us is what a truly human existence is like: a life radiant with love and compassion, a life which has itself been transformed into a gift for others, through being ‘caught up’ in the perfect community of love between Jesus and the Father, made present by the Spirit. And, as Jesus tells us in today’s Gospel, the making manifest of this kind of love by the Spirit reveals the lies that this world so often lives by when it forgets its most fundamental reality, the gift which stands behind its existence: the lies that equate difference, weakness, and misfortune with sin and personal culpability. The lies that make righteousness something of our own doing, and the basis for puffed up arrogance, hubris, and pride. The lies that lead us to judge others harshly, mistaking unimaginative prejudice for divine command. These lies are not the
pattern engrafted upon our souls by the word of truth. ‘Let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: for the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God’: only in meekness and charity will we trace the contours of the divine, because only by acknowledging that we are always already the recipients of a gift will we avoid the possessiveness, greed, and anxious defensiveness that so obscure God’s image within us.

Life is a gift, for it is given by the love of God. But the gift of our life is, to a very great extent, our ability to make life a gift for others, to shed God’s love abroad in our hearts. This is no small undertaking: it is the costly work of discipleship, imagination, and charity. Our growth in the Spirit will often mean painful transformation. But God’s gift is not finite, or conditional. God simply loves us, with a love that allows us to love unendingly. God simply gives, with a gift of life and love that allows us to go on giving the gift of our life and love to others, until at the last we are conformed to, and may contemplate with clarity, the great Giver himself, whose love is our life, our source, and our perfect end.

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