

# Sermon preached at King's College Cambridge

Ash Wednesday 2018

This is one of the great feasts of holy introspection in the Church year, possibly the greatest. This is the day when we should begin forty days of serious self-examination, going into a wilderness of the imagination and risking the loneliness, fear and disturbance that might be let loose upon us in such an endeavour. Jesus did this, in the flinty silence of the Judean desert. We can be assured of his company and encouragement in our own less literal journey.

That assurance is just one facet of a greater, infinitely greater, divine accompanying. However turned in on ourselves we might have become in our daily lives, however turned against ourselves we might be tempted to feel as we dig Lentenly deep, we are accompanied. Accompanied, borne up, nourished – all of which is to say, loved. Loved by God more than we dare imagine. One critical Lenten challenge is simply to believe that; because most of the time when we are turned in on ourselves, *incurvatus in se*, cramping inside, we just need to unfurl into the limitless love of God.

This love of God is almost impossible to talk about without resorting to cliché. Not only is human language inherently incapable of grasping more than the pale outlines of divine reality, it can also be maddeningly misleading within the confines of what we *can* say (or do say) in mere words. Take a line from the passage in the prophet Joel which we heard a moment ago:

*The Lord your God... is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repenteth him of the evil.*

Gracious, merciful, kind. These are right at the heart of how we understand the love of God, but repeated hearing can blunt their radical edge, can leave them as anodyne pleasantries. At the same time, their meaningfulness can be compromised when we hear words like 'anger' and 'repenteth him of the evil'. That one sentence of Joel captures well two parallel strands in the Old Testament. One is the quietly growing strand which recognises God's loving kindness and infinite mercy, and his desire for faithful hearts rather than empty ritual. This finds its fruition in the coming of Jesus: in what he taught, and in the achievement and meaning of what he did.

But much of the Old Testament exemplifies that other strand, the noisier one: the language, put at its simplest, of anger and vengeance. We mustn't be distracted or knocked off course by this. This is language which is yet to be tempered and translated by the transforming meaning of Jesus. It maps onto God what is in fact very human imagery: 'how would I feel if I were God in the face of such endless turning away from me and my commandments?' This projection of righteous indignation onto God can get us into very damaging territory. We don't need to lose a keen sense of God's no-doubt constant distress at our misdeeds, but that must be a part of the bigger sense that God is not to be simply placated, but loved (because he first loves us).

None of this is easy or without profound challenge. I have been accused before now of 'over-emphasising the love of God'; as though that were even possible. Well I'm not remotely convinced by a version of Christianity which comes at you with a smile and a piece of cake and then starts talking about wrath and sin and judgment and hell, and eventually gets to the love of God as a kind of prize for surviving that far.

No. The love of God, in all its infinite magnificence is where we start. We know about it in and from the person of Jesus, pre-eminently; and we are given glimpses and hints of it in the beauty and goodness we can see in creation and in God's supreme creation, people, ourselves included.

When we dare to believe this, (maybe just, to begin with, dare to live as though we believed it), then we can look to ourselves and have the courage to say, 'well, how do I shape up in the light of that love?' We are certainly not going to find perfection. We may find some stuff which is pretty upsetting. We will find the ways in which we are turned away from God, detached from him. This is what sin is.

But the God who loves us more than we can imagine, and knows us better than we know ourselves, and who has left a trace of himself in us, he will see us through our every moment of introspective honesty. His hand is outstretched towards us, offering to pull us towards him across that separation we call sin, ever ready to help us to our feet when we fall. This is the achievement of his death and resurrection, which is to put his unstoppable mercy within our grasp. Unstoppable, because however often we let go, we can reach out and grasp it again.

Ash Wednesday is the day, par excellence, on which to attempt or resume this great adventure. We can physically start this tonight by being marked with ash. It is the sign of humility, the sign of groundedness in the dust from which we were formed. It is ash from which our souls can take phoenix-like flight, alight with the burning fire of God's love.