

A SERMON IN KING'S COLLEGE CHAPEL

Epiphany 3

Preparing a sermon for the congregation at Kings College Chapel was not anywhere near my mind when I responded to my calling to priesthood. I was in the middle of my life, having worked for the EU in post-conflict reconstruction in the Balkans and on crisis management in Ukraine and Georgia - plus dealing with domestic crises in the shape of two children, a husband and dog! It is a privilege to receive ordination training and study Theology in Cambridge, even more so to be on attachment at this very chapel. While on attachment, I am allowed a glimpse into the duties of the clergy. I observe. Ask questions (some would think too many questions!). For me, the most special occasions are when I am allowed to serve at the Eucharist. It is very moving. Another privilege is that I once a year I am invited to prepare a sermon, and share with you my thoughts on what Our Lord is guiding and asking us to do.

There are different ways to understand the Bible and God's guidance, and make sense of it. The way that I prepare for a sermon is by engaging in a process called *Lectio Divina*. This is a meditation exercise to help one appreciate more deeply what a passage of scripture has to say. I will go to my room, switch off the outside world, say a prayer asking that I will be able to receive the word of God. Then I read the readings we have heard today. I meditate. Thereafter I will read both texts again. Finally, I will say a prayer on my meditations.

What I received from today's readings is the incredibly liberating and comforting light of Christ. A light which I believe will carry me through life and its challenges. A hope as strong as the liberated Jews

would find, and a light of hope which Christ was prophesised to fulfil. It is comforting going into that light.

Meditating on this light was deeply comforting to me, but then the realities of life hit me. Before being called, I was trying to establish security structures that could protect the weakest in our societies. Being part of preparing borders to secure Europe. We were not asked to protect the vulnerable immigrant mother and child. A mother who might have suffered multiple occasions of sexual abuse on her journey, who wants to give her child opportunities she can only dream of. We would be informed by the intelligence services about politicians involved in the trafficking of young girls. Girls they would recruit by establishing debts for them at fruit juice bars outside their schools. Run up a debt which they could pay off easily, if only they would provide a few services. These same politicians I would make laws with. I would prepare protection of cultural heritage sites, churches included. But I would not really ask them – ‘so what about these stories we hear about trafficking of girls and drug dealing – how about that?’.

I did not ask those questions. And I wonder how I can reconcile that light I received in the Lectio Divina with the realities of the world. It is not something I pretend I can reconcile in a matter of a 10 minutes sermon. But it is something I have been thinking about, and which forms a large part of my calling.

One person who gave this a lot of thought was the Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard, who lived at the same time as Hans Christian Andersen. And this summer a group of us went to his grave in downtown Copenhagen, with a six-pack of Carlsbergs, to further reason with him.

By the way my English husband was horrified when I told him about this, but let me reassure you all that it is perfectly normal in Denmark to take your picnic and beers, to have an inspiring chat with the deceased at this cemetery.

What is this comforting light of Christ all about?

Kierkegaard is as impossible to understand as is the reconciliation between Christ's light and the realities of the world. He wanted it to be hard and difficult. Because it is only when it is so incredibly hard and difficult that we will bother searching the light of God. And much more importantly, only then will we start looking for what it will require of ourselves.

Kierkegaard has helped me to accept the complexities of myself. Namely, as one who lives my real actual life – the two children, husband, dog and mortgage. But I am also one who is vulnerable. I guess we are all vulnerable. We all have aspects of ourselves, where we have said or done – or not done – things we are not particularly proud of. We are all overwhelmed by the injustices of this world. So overwhelmed that we believe it easier not to engage with much of it. Excusing ourselves because it's too difficult and not our own immediate concern. And our dreams are also a part of ourselves. I have a dream of becoming a priest. A dream of empowering people, who have felt all their lives they were not worth fighting for. A dream of creating a stronger awareness and choice behind our western democracies. A dream that I will not have to look too much at conventions, norms and others' expectations. We all have a potential to be fulfilled.

All of this and all of these are aspects of ourselves. All of this is who we are. The interplay between our actual circumstances and our dreams. Also, all the nasty stuff we do not want others to know

about. And all the stuff which overwhelms us, which we would rather ignore. Because if we address it it fills us with anxiety, make us feel inadequate. I guess we all have dark places where we struggle the most. These thoughts and fears, worries and concerns we keep only to ourselves are what the French call 'les jardins secrets' - secret gardens. Our own secret gardens are also part of our true self. I believe God sees them.

If we do not embrace and deal with them, then our worries and fears will eat us up, and stop us from fulfilling our potential. But it can be pretty difficult to embrace all these aspects by ourselves. And this is where the light of Christ comes in. Let us take Christ's invitation to turn away from our secret garden of shame, inaction, of feeling overwhelmed. Let us allow God to illuminate our darkest inner self. Can God somehow help us to see who we are, and embrace ourselves? We might just invite him to shine at our most difficult spots. Could his loving gaze possibly help us to shine at those aspects differently, and empower us to do things differently in future?

In our last hymn we will sing, 'God is working his purpose out'. The next verse will begin 'What can we do to work God's work', and the final 'All we can do is nothing worth unless God blesses the deed'. Whatever we do, let us try to allow God to help us on the way, help us in those spaces where we feel vulnerable and overwhelmed. Somehow allow ourselves to become the instruments of God, and try to enact God's will on earth.

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Isaiah 9 2-4; Matthew 4 12-23*