

A SERMON IN KING'S COLLEGE CHAPEL

True Humanity

'A wondering Aramean was my father', begins one of the earliest Creeds of Israel, the people of God. They were a wandering, travelling people, summoned by the promise of God made first to Israel's forebears, Abraham and Sarah, and then held out in the form of a promised land to the Israelites as they wandered for forty years in the deserts wastes after their escape from bondage in Egypt.

In our Gospel passage today, we hear of how Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness and was tempted there for forty days and forty nights. The wilderness, the arid expanse of desert is a place of testing. It was for God's people after the Exodus, and it was for Jesus.

Dennis Potter's play *Son of Man* begins with Jesus lying on the ground thumping a clenched fist into the sand as he repeatedly says: 'Is it me, is it me?' The question of our identity, of who we are and how we show ourselves to others in how we are and in what we say and do, is the question that is posed directly to us as we travel through the forty days of this season of Lent. The question of our identity is a hugely complex one, but at its sharpest, it asks what it is that we are made of, and to what purpose.

Our Lenten journey began on Ash Wednesday, and during the service on that day, those who gathered in this chapel were invited to receive an ash cross on their forehead as a sign of repentance. In this simple ritual action, we are confronted with the stark reality of our human condition: 'Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.' We're made from the stuff of the earth and to earth we will all return.

Now it would be banal to say that being reminded of this is simply a call to remain earthed, to keep our feet on the ground. There is something more here. ‘Humankind’ is taken from the stuff of the earth, from humus, the rich stuff from which all growing things draw the necessary nutrients and minerals to grow in the way they should.

And here we may recall those similar sounding words: humus, humanity, and humility. And in this family of words we begin to see what it is that our Lenten message says to us about who and what it is that we should be and become.

A 14th century English treatise *The Cloud of Unknowing* comes close to a definition where it says: ‘humility is a knowledge of oneself as one really is...’ The kind of self-knowledge that is spoken of here is not to be confused with our own cultural preoccupations of how others see us. On the contrary it provides the firm ground on which we can confidently be who we are, rather than anxiously questioning ourselves whenever pictures of others hit us through our digital media. ‘Is it me?’ is not a question that requires us to constantly experiment with new or different identities. We need to be happy in our own skin.

Our Gospel passage today speaks of the three so-called temptations that Jesus faced in the Judean desert. The story is cast as a kind of contest between Jesus and the devil, but whatever the episode was, it was a kind of testing. And then we can read these three temptations as a test for our sense of humanity, a test of what it means to be a human being.

The first temptation was to turn the stones of that barren place into bread. To do this would certainly have met a basic human need, but what this testing illustrates is that human beings have needs beyond that of basic

sustenance. We need companions, literally, others to share our bread, and above all, we need to recognise a deep hunger for the things of God.

The second temptation Jesus faced was to throw himself down from the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem, and let others see how the angels would make sure that he didn't even hurt his foot against a stone. This was not the way of Jesus. He refused to perform a sensational, attention grabbing feat. It would, of course, have been the ultimate selfie. But life is not really about achieving celebrity status, or being in the public eye. On the contrary, true humanity is more often seen in the lives of those who recognise that they are a part of a whole; that they belong to and are called to contribute to a wider community of shared values and aspirations. Quite simply, being the best that I can be is not so much about 'me' as about being alive to the sense that one's life is bound up with the lives of others, that we are, as S. Paul says, 'members one of another.'

The third temptation is the temptation to be the master of all that Jesus could see from the top of the highest mountain. And this too is rejected, and is rejected because true humanity is shown not when we seek to control, or have power over others, but, on the contrary, when we encourage and draw out what is the best in others, of our families, friends and colleagues.

Jesus struggled in the desert, and as we heard in our Epistle, St. Paul also had his struggles in his life and ministry as an apostle. And when he recounts the difficulties and dangers he faced, he concludes with a series of paradoxes: 'unknown, and yet known,' 'chastened, and not killed,' 'having nothing, and yet possessing all things.'

How do we resolve the apparent contradictions in what Paul says here?

Perhaps by returning to those words spoken on Ash Wednesday and by seeing that the stuff of which we are made is the stuff from which glory is made.

Ultimately, this is not our doing, our achievement, but the work of grace. That grace of God which works with the grain of who we are, and of all that makes us the unique individuals that we are. ‘Is it me?’ Well, I am me (with all my faults and foibles) but the best in me is what God is making of me. And this making and remaking is something ongoing. It may take a whole life time, and works through all the different stages of life. But whatever stage of life we have reached in our individual life journey, we press on “to mature humanity, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” This is the goal of our Lenten journey, to grow into that true humanity shown to us by Christ.

Canon Christopher Irvine

2 Corinthians 6.1-10; Matthew 4.1-11

The First Sunday of Lent, 10.3.2018