

Epiphany 3 Year C 2010

Men, we're told, are not good at multi-tasking. That may go some way towards explaining my difficulty with this sermon. For today is both the Sunday within the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity and the Third Sunday of Epiphany, with its own particular readings. What's more, being the 24th of January, it is also the Feast day of Francis – not the radical saint of Assisi but Francis de Sales who was the Roman Catholic Bishop of Geneva in the 17th century. So how do we hold all these themes together? Well, I have decided to give a nod towards Christian Unity by engaging with words from a different Christian Tradition and looking a little at the writing of Francis de Sales alongside today's readings.

In 1608 Francis wrote a book entitled "An Introduction to the Devout Life". This is a book about loving God, which was written not for the religious professional but for lay people. Towards the end of his book Francis tells his readers how the early Christians celebrated the Baptism of Jesus, which we kept two weeks ago, by renewing their commitment to Christ. And Francis suggests that in Epiphany-tide we too should do something similar. He uses the analogy of the clock. Even the best clock, he says, needs to be cleaned and

overhauled as well as being regularly wound up. In the same way we too should have a proper concern for our soul and once a year give it an overhaul. To help us in this task he gives us seven spiritual exercises, which each come with a list of questions about where we are in our commitment to living the Christian life. However, it occurred to me that a twenty-eight-point sermon might cause more concern about your lunch than the state of your soul so I have provided you with a drastically abridged, paraphrased version in your Order of Service.

We begin with “The Soul towards God” and the question about our attitude to worship and hearing the Scriptures. Francis de Sales describes the words of scripture as precious, which is why they are to be loved. But, the power of the *written* word rests on the extent to which it brings us into relationship with Jesus, *the Word made flesh*. The authority of scripture is not found *in* the words themselves as if they give us infallible information and data. The power of scripture lies *through* the words. We have to ask for the Holy Spirit to help us read between the lines so that we meet with Jesus. So as we gather together in worship hearing the Word is not about reminiscence but Presence – about encountering the real presence of Jesus. (Bishop

Michael Marshall) All of which leads us to today's Old Testament reading.

After 70 years in exile Nehemiah and Ezra led a small remnant of Israelites back to the ruins of Jerusalem. As they started to rebuild the city, they also worshipped. They gathered together and Ezra the Scribe read the scriptures, probably the Books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus, in Hebrew. As God's words for his people were explained to the people in Aramaic, they wept. It's as if the people were brought back into conscious relationship with the Living God, who had seemed to abandon them in exile, *through* the words. And that is why Nehemiah and Ezra tell the people not to weep but rather to rejoice. For they are once more in relationship with the Lord and the scriptures tell us that God takes joy and delight in those who love him. "So do not grieve", says Nehemiah, for "the joy of the Lord is your strength". This joy, though, is not to be self-indulgent emotion. They are to celebrate by enjoying good food and drink *and* by sharing sacrificially what they have with those who have little or nothing.

And that takes us back to Francis de Sales. We are to love worship and the Word of God because it brings us into relationship with Jesus. It is able to make him joyfully present

to us. But all this joy and strength is not to be hoarded as a private delight. It is to be shared. That is why Francis de Sales challenges us with his second question in this section: “Have you sacrificed anything for God? What could we give for love of him?”

Well, proper reflection on that needs to be done at home because for the moment we need to move on to the second exercise: “The Soul towards our neighbour”. Do we love the unloveable and the intractable? And this fundamental question about loving our neighbour takes us straight to this morning’s epistle and Paul’s image of the body. It’s a powerful image because we know what he is talking about from our own experience. In order to pick up a wine glass we know it’s not enough to have an arm and four fingers – we also need an opposable thumb. We need *different* parts of the body if we are to function. We need liver and thorax, metatarsal and eyelash being themselves, and doing their separate jobs, yet as parts of one body. In this context unity and diversity are not contradictory but necessary.

That’s fine when we are talking about a physical body. But, put us in community with people who look, smell, think, talk and behave differently and the analogy of the body is

less appealing. Instead we tend to encounter a wounded body where the neck can be a pain. Where the brains want everyone to be brains and won't connect with the dirty feet. Or we meet hands that want to control the whole body and even do the tasks of the whole body. This is why someone has defined community as "that place where the person you least want to live with always lives".

And Paul was very aware of this woundedness when writing to the Christians in Corinth. The conflict there was over spiritual gifts although the start of today's passage also hints at ethnic and sociological differences too. But, Paul deals with this communal dysfunction with a statement that is shocking in its directness. He says this in v.18: "God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose". There is the answer to Francis de Sale's question about how we begin to love the unloveable and intractable. They are God's gift to us. Somewhere, beneath all the wounds, they are part of God's purpose for his body. And therefore we have to keep asking positively, not complainingly: "Why has God put this person here"? "What is their gift to us"?

So we come to the third section: The soul towards itself, and the question (there is a typo here I'm afraid) which

should read: Do we care *more* for God's opinion of us or for the opinion of others"?

In every age Christians have characterized the sort of Messiah Jesus is. And their portrayal of Jesus often tends to be related to the culture of the time. So the 18th century MP John Ward rather bizarrely pictured Jesus as his Insurance agent. He prayed: O Lord, give prosperous voyage and safe return to the sloop "Mermaid", because I have not insured it...and make all my servants so honest and faithful that they may always attend to my interest and never cheat me out of my property night or day." In complete contrast some Liberation theologians of the 20th century saw Jesus as a revolutionary whose messianic role was to overthrow a corrupt military regime. And in today's gospel reading the people of Nazareth also had to face the question: "what sort of Messiah is Jesus"? Luke is quite clear that Jesus is a prophetic Messiah anointed with the Spirit of God. And he demonstrates this by announcing good news, releasing the captives, and letting the oppressed go free wherever he finds them, not just amongst the chosen people of God. This is what God has called him to be and equipped him to do.

And this concept of Messiah brought him into conflict. The sequel to today's gospel records the people of Nazareth

being so incensed by Jesus' picture of the Messiah coming for the poor and the oppressed of *all* nations, that they try to hurl him over a cliff. But, Jesus is not concerned about being the Messiah people want. His only focus is being the Messiah that God knows the world needs. And Jesus is crystal clear about his role as messiah because, according to Luke, he has just spent 40 days in the wilderness giving himself in the emptiness of the desert to listen and respond to God's call.

And there is the clue for us. If we are to seek to be the people God wants us to be and we care more for *his* opinion, then we need to present ourselves in open, empty givenness before God – that's how a nun from the Fairacres community put it. Without that open emptiness, she says, our life will be counterfeit. We will seek only what suits us or makes us popular with those around us. So there we are. I must finish. Please do take the words of Francis de Sales home with you and ponder them. Use them as a source of renewal so that the "joy of the Lord may really be our strength".

I am grateful to Rev/ Barbara Brown for her insights into the Body language of St. Paul.

**Epiphany spiritual exercise from “An Introduction to the Devout
Life”
by St. Francis de Sales**

The Soul towards God:

Do you love worship and hearing God’s Word?

Have you sacrificed anything for God (time, money etc.)? What could you give for love of him?

The Soul towards our neighbour:

Do you love the unloveable and intractable? (You must call to mind sundry disagreeable, annoying people, for it is in such cases that we really practise the Love of God with respect to our neighbours, and still more towards them that do us wrong, either by word or deed).

The Soul towards itself:

Do we care more for God’s opinion of us, or for the opinions of others towards us?