

Cathedral Mattins 5th August 2018

Psalm 86; Song of Solomon 5 v.2-8; 2 Peter 1 v.1-11

*May I speak in the name of the living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Amen*

Dear God, please make me good, but not just yet. This child's prayer raises a smile, being both charmingly naive, and also astute. This prayer recognises that God wants good behaviour from us, but disobedience and pleasing ourselves look like a lot more fun.

Many years ago I met an elderly lady called Edna who told me that she didn't go to church because, as she put it, *she wasn't good enough*. Her perception was that going to church, being religious, being a Christian, was all about *what God wants from us* – it was all about trying to live a pure and holy life, and it didn't sound like any fun at all.

And as a philosophy it has 2 glaring weaknesses: first, everyone knows we should all be better and kinder and more generous – there is nothing particularly Christian about it; and second, everyone knows we can't do it – not consistently anyway. We lapse; we fall short. So if Edna thought she wasn't good enough, she probably worked out that she wasn't ever going to be good enough, so she might as well give up, and have fun instead.

But the truth is that we were always good enough for God – because *while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.* [Ro 5.8] *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.* [2 Cor.5.21] In our reading this morning, Peter is encouraging all believers to engage in that process whereby we become the righteousness of God.

Peter's message is not so much about what God wants *from* us, but about what God wants *for* us.

And what God wants for us is nothing less than to become a part of the divine nature. We become a part of the divine nature when we receive the Spirit of the living God, conferring on us the power to change the focus and direction of our lives. This power works *through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness ...* [2 Peter 1.3] It is a process of transformation – a transformation, little by little, from our self-pleasing nature into a God-pleasing nature.

C S Lewis put it like this: *For mere improvement is no redemption, though redemption always improves people even here and now and will, in the end, improve them to a degree we cannot yet imagine. God became man to turn creatures into sons: not simply to produce better men of the old kind, but to produce a new kind of man. It is not like teaching a horse to jump better and better, but like turning a horse into a winged creature.* [Mere Christianity p 178]

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But transformation is a process, and it takes time. The wings on C S Lewis's winged horse do not appear all at once; they grow, little by little. And Peter explains to his readers that if we co-operate, if we collaborate, with God as we exercise his gift, then the process of transformation starts to build. So we should make every effort to support our faith with goodness as it builds into knowledge, self-control, endurance, godliness, mutual affection and love.

Transformation is not passive – we have our part to play. But his divine power has given us everything we need to play our part; our efforts are fuelled by this divine power of the Holy Spirit.

St Richard expressed this transformation so beautifully in his prayer ... *to know thee more clearly, love thee more dearly, and follow thee more nearly.* He understood that it is through the increasing knowledge of him who has called us by his own glory and goodness that we naturally come to love him, and when we increasingly love him we will naturally want to follow him – to follow his teaching. St Richard understood transformation through his own experience.

And as we increasingly know him within our hearts, we are not *compelled* but *impelled* to be more loving, more obedient to God's ways. We become like the lover in the Song of Solomon who longs to be with her Beloved, and to follow him. *I slept but my heart was awake.* [S of S 5.2] Even when she was asleep, her heart was listening for him to come and knock at her door, because they were soulmates and their hearts beat as one.

When Peter urges us to confirm our call, it is not to make *God* more certain of it, but to make *us* more certain of it, so that we can have the confidence, the assurance, to believe that we can and will grow into fulfilled and fruitful people. We can become a part of the divine nature; we can grow towards maturity in Christ, and in him we can become the righteousness of God.

This is what God wants for us.