

St Mary-le-Bow, Cheapside, London EC2V 6AU

High Mass and Imposition of Ashes

The Revd George Bush, Rector

Ash Wednesday 26 February 2020 at 1.05pm

The environmental crisis – and much else coincidental with it – requires from Christians and all who love God a proper anthropology; a vision of what it is to be human which convinces and does not mock either our tradition or the insights of psychology. There is plenty of evidence and much suggests that ‘being human’ is a rather a floating concept for many today. I thought it notable that habits in January were dominated by a sort of stand-off between ‘dry January’ and ‘Veganuary’; but were both more to do with the poisoning of the human biological system from December binges than the pillage of the planet? The anthropology of Lent has some comparators; the idea that there is season in which we seek to temper our appetites for spiritual reasons can frankly look a bit like a health cure. When the clergy give up alcohol you have to wonder what the laity must think!

If we invite people to a ‘holy Lent’ we can’t afford an obscured or frankly incredible anthropology which has all too often been the handmaid of theology - issuing in racism, sexism, homophobia and crude nationalism, sometimes for the sake of Jesus. Assuredly diversity is the name of the game- the Oscars and the Baftas bend over to apologise for an absence of diversity amongst their nominees for awards; and the boatclub of my undergraduate college is displaying the rainbow flag. And I heard suggested on the radio that the boffins of the Department of Education are not qualified to administer the nation’s education as being almost wholly recruited from Russell universities or worse – Oxbridge.

The Church struggles to navigate this kind of territory, always hopelessly behind the curve and has lately declared that ‘quality of mind’ is no longer to be a criterion for Ordination as likely to be too off-putting; and yet when diversity is listed in this diocese ‘sexual orientation’ is invariably omitted; a ludicrous anthropology indeed. But some of this should not be wondered at because the object of the diversity agenda – vastly and rightly directed to the valuing of human dignity - is also the boundless toleration of our age. Anything goes – not just ethically desensitised, not merely permissive; reluctant to define what is right or wrong - for in some ways we are less generous in our judgements, more suspicious, censorious and unforgiving - but the conviction reigns that how we feel ourselves to be, or to have become is our right, and moreover our road to contentment.

This is not what Christians believe. The earliest Christians had an obsession with sex such that our history was infected with the belief that its potency would lead to a contamination best resisted. For St Augustine, whose influence abounds, the renunciation of sex was an essential element in his embrace of the Faith. Dr Freud –

who knew as much about sex as Augustine – might be a better modern guide. But we cannot evade the principle of renunciation at the heart of Christian devotion which will not allow us to be just what we feel like.

As Christians we do not want to search our nature and own its demands in every respect; I do not want to be more George-like (you'll be glad to hear) but more like Jesus. This requires me to moderate my selfness (if you like) for the greater good of the church and the wider community. I am to be described not by who I 'truly am' but by what I offer to others. This must never be by the road of suppression – which is invariably injurious – but the road of renunciation which is always hard.

Lent is intended to be a dose of realism. I once spent a few nights (not forty) in the desert and discovered it to be a place where one dare not and probably cannot hide. We are to examine how we are in the injury we do to others, to ourselves and increasingly to the planet. We are to acknowledge that the whole aim of life is not to secure our own contentment or to be the centre of our own drama. We are to renounce – to find some tokens of thought, action or consumption which we could eschew for forty days as symbols that we are not yet what God would have us be; we are not yet like Jesus. And then in Passiontide we shall discover afresh God's own self renunciation – that he is only God for others, for us and has no contentment except in offering. For in his loss of himself on the Cross we discover that Jesus is indeed the Christ.

But no renunciation, no heroism of chocolate or aperol spritz; of better timekeeping or more careful speaking; of self-control, less plastic or deliberate kindness will achieve anything unless we first apply God's judgement to ourselves before others, and his mercy to others before ourselves.