

Lent 1 Chester Cathedral 10am 13.3.11

Gen 2: 15-17; 3: 1-7; Mt 4: 1-11

Certainty or compromise?

‘I will not compromise my Christian faith.’ How many of us might say as much, in defence of our faith, as Owen and Eunice Johns, the couple at the centre of a High Court ruling that their views on homosexuality might make them unsuitable to foster certain children. In a Radio 4 interview on the Today programme they persistently said that they would love the children in their care but would not compromise their view that homosexuality is wrong and their right to teach that to the children in their care.

Let me be clear- I am not intending to preach on the issue of human sexuality. What interests me, and what I want to talk about, are not *issues* (of which there are many) but *attitudes* and in particular this attitude of certainty- and what I want to call the cost of certainty.

God tells Adam and Eve: ‘ you may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.’

One might accuse God of being a spoil sport. Surely knowledge is a good thing? Do we not need to understand good and evil? And if we know what is good and what is evil, we can decide who is in and who is out, we can comfort ourselves with our opinions about who is going to heaven and who is going to the other place, best of all

we can feel safe and in control. We can be proud of our capacity to make moral judgements.

The problem with that is that when we put moral judgements first, love seldom happens. The need to be in control gets in the way of our search for truth, for love, for God. God knows that, which is why he didn’t want us to eat of that particular tree. He knew we wouldn’t be able to handle this knowledge well. He didn’t want us to have this lust for certainty, for explanations and for answers. These attitudes make biblical faith impossible.

Faith is about not knowing and not needing to know. In our modern world that is a profoundly uncomfortable and unvalued attitude. We have embraced scientific certainty and many religious people have been deceived into thinking faith can be treated like science, with proof texts underpinning proclaimed certainties. The cost is obvious and deeply deplorable- in the case of the Johns’ couple, the loss of their capacity and willingness to love and care for children who need a foster home. Love is the casualty in the cause of not compromising certainty.

False moral certitude is the original sin. It is what the Fall is about. Human beings think they can handle everything; they put themselves in the place of God. Instead of God being first, it is what we know, what we think, that matters. Self, over against God.

And those are precisely the temptations which Jesus faces in his battle with Satan in the wilderness. Be relevant, be spectacular, be powerful, Satan says. Why not?

Let's look at why not, in the light of what I have been saying. First the temptation to be relevant, to turn stones into bread. What's wrong with that- many in the world are crying out to be fed, and it is a perfectly proper Christian aspiration, and indeed duty, to work for a world where all have their basic human needs met. How marvellous if we could just make it happen by snapping our fingers. How great we would feel, that we had done something, made a difference. And gained the admiration and respect of an indifferent generation. Our usefulness would be established; we wouldn't feel so marginal.

But – we do not live by bread alone. The world does not think it needs spiritual answers to its problems but practical solutions- and yet it is perfectly obvious that you only need to scratch the surface to find despair, loneliness, isolation, an unmet search for meaning in the hearts of millions. There is a deeper need to be satisfied than the need for bread. And it can only be addressed when we live close to Jesus, our lives rooted in prayer. The debate is most often conducted at a moral level- the rights and wrongs of issues. Somehow we have to relate at a much deeper level, that of God's love for us- the base line of everything else we may or may not do.

Satan tries again- do something spectacular, you're special. Today's celebrity culture has fallen big-time for that one- craving popularity is a replacement for love and meaning and it is an attempt to deny human limits.

From bankers to footballers to TV celebrities we see that thinking in force today- the rules don't apply to us, we don't have to respect limits and boundaries.

And Jesus' reply- there are limits, and I can't fly. Respect what it means to be human and don't play God.

And finally the third temptation; be powerful at any cost- sell your soul to the devil. Ever since the serpent sold to Eve the lie that eating the fruit of the tree was a good thing to do, human beings have been tempted to replace love with power. It is after all easier to exercise power than to love.

And that exercise of power leads us not towards God but further away. It corrupts our humanity, it corrupts our faith. The root of that word corrupt means breaking, breaking faith with the one who loves us.

We live in a broken world, a world which as individuals we are not capable of mending. Trying to put the world to rights from our own flawed moral certainties will never work. We are not God. Insisting that we know the mind of God is a terrible temptation. Can we learn to live in the broken middle, with inconsistency and ambiguity, recognising that we don't have answers, that we are all broken, that we cannot deal with the problem of good and evil.

As we get older many of us discover that most things in life cannot be viewed in terms of black and white, but only infinite shades of grey. Most of us know from bitter experience that nothing in life is certain. The people of Japan know that painful reality most shockingly this week. Can we, having seen only from afar these scenes of devastation, still hold to our pious certainties, or do we have to humbly admit that we do not know- that the God we are called to believe in and trust in is a mystery beyond our

comprehension, that God is bigger and more different, infinitely stranger than we can imagine. St John of the Cross called such faith a 'luminous darkness'.

When we have the confidence and maturity not to need to hang on to our certainties then we are in a place where we can accept compromise- even of our understanding of faith-and we can support and care for each other without seeking to judge, or to impose our views, or to solve what are often unsolvable situations. As we commission today our first Pastoral Care Team at this cathedral this is important to hold onto and reflect on-the love and care to be offered is God's love and care, mediated humbly through us without seeking to limit his grace.

I pray for all of us that this journey through Lent will take us deeper into the heart of God. To make that journey we have to give up our craving for certainty, for answers. The only thing never to be compromised is the gaze of God- and God is mystery. There are no certainties in this world- only faith and trust that there is a God whose love for us will never cease.

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