

Sermon for the third Sunday before Lent, 12 February 2017

1 Corinthians 3:1-9, Matthew 5:21-37 - Casting nasturtiums

'I am for Paul, ... I am for Apollos.' Sometimes people 'cast nasturtiums' (as somebody once said) in the direction of Christians who have a different theology, a different way of 'doing words about God', literally. Sometimes I think I have heard those 'nasturtiums' aimed at those who call themselves Evangelicals.

This morning I want to try to give you an example of how these debates can arise, so that perhaps you can think a bit about the principles involved so that, as St Paul says, whoever you think Apollos and Paul are, in our debates, they are simply God's agents in bringing us to faith.

You will notice that Paul does not say that Apollos or Paul are right or wrong; that one is right and one is wrong; he simply says that both are working for the same objective. He gives a picturesque example of two gardeners, one planting the seed and the other watering it, but nothing happening until God makes the flowers grow. (I'm not sure whether those flowers were nasturtiums ...)

Of course so much of what we say about God has of necessity to be rather tentative. As St Paul himself puts it, we see 'as through a glass, darkly' [1 Corinthians 13]. We have our limitations in understanding the greatness, the ineffability, of God: but that does not make him in any way less real.

That said, I'm not going to say very much about the other great piece of teaching which we have heard in the Bible lessons today, that is, Jesus's Sermon on the Mount: partly because everyone here more or less knows it by heart, and partly because the lesson that I want to draw from it today is a simple one. That is, that the Sermon on the Mount has, and indeed a lot of Jesus' teaching has, a contrarian flavour.

One commentator has described it as 'a whole new way of looking at human behaviour, which is totally at odds with what is normally thought reasonable.' (Brendan Byrne, *Lifting the Burden: Reading Matthew's Gospel in the Church today* - quoted in 'The Measure of Perfection', by Bridget Nichols, *Church Times*, 10th February 2017, p.17).

Totally at odds with what is normally thought reasonable. In other words, if you had been around with the disciples or in the crowds listening to Jesus, you might well have thought that what he was saying was not really very sensible. Turning the other cheek, and going the extra mile, loving your enemy and, in this part of the Sermon, the so-called 'St Matthew's exception'

to the rules of divorce. Jesus apparently said that it is all right for a man to divorce his wife for reasons of - the Greek word is πορνεία - the same word which we still have, 'porn', sometimes translated as unchastity or adultery.

Certainly today we would have a lot of difficulty literally carrying out what Jesus appears to be teaching. In any case it is teaching which is couched in the society of 2000 years ago; very male dominated; only the man has the right to start divorce proceedings, for example; only the woman can be guilty of adultery. But there are no references to the principles which we bring to bear in dealing with marriage breakdown. Sometimes there is more hurt involved in keeping people together than allowing them to separate. Jesus does not say anything at all about what happens to the children in a divorce. We might go as far as to say that what Jesus says is, in the commentator's words, 'at odds with what is normally thought to be reasonable'.

Well I don't actually want to go into that today except to point out the fact that what Jesus teaches often may not look very practical, but it is all brought into focus in his great commandments of love, to love God and love your neighbour.

Sometimes, however, these things end up in a way which we would never expect - and frankly in a not very good way, so that I think it is quite fair for us, when we are doing theology, when we are doing our 'God talk', to go back and look critically at some of the principles which we may have thought were correct in understanding God, because after all they seem to lead to consequences which ultimately don't reflect those commandments of love.

'Okay, my brain hurts!' you might say. 'This is all rather too theoretical'. Let's look at something specific, to illustrate what I am going on about. I think most of us will have been rather moved, and perhaps saddened, by what Bishop Andrew has had to say about having suffered abuse at the hands of an ostensibly Christian leader at a summer camp he attended when he was a teenager. The Archbishop of Canterbury has also talked about these same camps, although he did not suffer any abuse. Poor Bishop Andrew has told us that he was beaten, caned, by one of the leaders, a man called John Smyth, who is currently living in South Africa.

Apparently the summer camps involved a lot of beatings in a garden shed. And indeed the camps were set up by a man whose nickname was 'Bash'. They seem to have been inspired by the idea of so-called 'muscular Christianity', which seems to have arisen in Victorian times, possibly as a reaction against the rather romantic and perhaps somewhat effete ideas of the Anglo-Catholic revival, the Tractarians, the so-called Oxford Movement: John Henry Newman, Pusey, Keble, Froude and the others, mostly gathered in the senior common room at Oriel College Oxford.

We all used to laugh at Billy Bunter – ‘six of the best’ were always administered at some stage or another all in all the stories. ‘Tom Brown’s Schooldays’ painted a picture of Rugby School where there was an awful lot of ‘six of the best’. Underpinning all this was the idea that it was conducive to spiritual improvement to undergo physical suffering, especially vicarious suffering, instead of or on behalf of somebody else.

This was regarded as having a religious significance. It is bound up with the idea of sacrifice. People pointed to Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac his son: to the suffering in Isaiah chapter 53, ‘He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities... and with his stripes we are healed.’ Think of the aria in Handel’s Messiah,

‘He was despised and rejected of men,
A man of sorrow and acquainted with grief..’

The word ‘stripes’ in this means ‘beatings’, lashes. Of course there are all these references in the epistles in the New Testament – 1 Corinthians 15, for example, ‘Christ died for our sins’: Hebrews chapter 5, ‘Even though Jesus was God's son, he learned obedience from the things he suffered’: Hebrews chapter 9, ‘Christ died once for all as a sacrifice to take away the sins of the people’. 1 Peter chapter 2, ‘By his wounds you are healed.’

The idea is what is called ‘substitutionary atonement’, or ‘penal substitution’. It is one of the things that distinguishes the theology of the Evangelicals in Christianity. You might have thought, from some of the things that have been affectionately said in the past, that these dreaded Evangelicals were distinguished by their colourful behaviour in church, waving their arms around, and by their ability to conjure up guitars in inappropriate places in the service: but really a much more important difference is their belief in this idea of substitutionary atonement. ‘Greater love hath no man...’, and so on.

The idea is that, through Jesus’ suffering, we are made right with God, justified: that we have been brought back like a lost sheep, and this has been made possible because one of the other sheep has been hurt, even though it did not deserve to be. It was the Lamb of God, the scapegoat. It is a very old Jewish idea, from the Book of Leviticus, chapter 16, celebrated even today in the Day of Atonement in Judaism.

As Giles Fraser has pointed out in a recent article [<http://tinyurl.com/jrncff8>], the muscular Christians of the Victorian age, and indeed more recently in ‘Bash’s’ camps and in the public schools until very recently, the idea was that regular beatings were character-forming.

It may be that some of you have suffered this, and your determination not to show weakness, to be brave in the face of what is, frankly, bestial behaviour and cruelty, you might say has made you a better person.

But I think, although we admire the bravery of people who have suffered, we know better. I think that it is at least arguable that it is a very odd picture of God, that he would countenance the causing of terrible hurt and pain intentionally. Not only that, but that he would intentionally inflict that pain and suffering on his own son.

This is surely not the picture of a loving God. Liberal theologians, like the great John Macquarrie, once upon a time Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity and Canon of Christ Church, Oxford, for example, reject the idea of substitutionary atonement, because, when you follow the idea to its logical conclusion, the pain would seem to be the product of a God of hate rather than of a God of love. [See John Macquarrie, 1966, Principles of Christian Theology, revised 1977, 5th impression 1984: London, SCM Press, p.315]

In so many ways we realise that God is not a god of hate or a God who wishes to cause hurt - 'They shall not hurt and destroy on God's holy mountain', a vision of heaven, in Isaiah again. We have to have a better understanding of God than 'six of the best' for Billy Bunter; except that it is not a laughing matter, as poor Bishop Andrew so bravely pointed out.

Amen.

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