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The Parker Sermons

St Cuthbert's Thetford
Norwich Cathedral

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Cover
Archbishop Matthew Parker
Flemish School, 16th

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THE PARKER SERMONS

The first Elizabethan Archbishop of Canterbury Matthew Parker (1504–75), who came from Norfolk, became concerned about the spiritual state of the Norfolk clergy, and instituted an annual series of four sermons with the object of their spiritual improvement. Though the original need has gone, the series continues. The preacher is appointed by Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, Parker's college and which houses his library. I was appointed Parker Preacher for 2009-10. It was an honour to be one in an unbroken line of preachers since 16th century. The preacher gives two sermons in successive years in four churches nominated by Archbishop Parker.

I Abide in my Love

St Cuthbert's, Thetford, 17 May 2009

AFTER BEING INVITED to be the Parker Preacher I was intrigued to discover that Archbishop Parker, like me, had been a canon of Ely Cathedral. He was one of the first canons appointed by Henry VIII after the monastery at Ely was dissolved. At first, I thought that we had lived in the same house, but it seems that we did not; his house was opposite mine in the cathedral close. Twenty years after Parker was at Ely – twenty years of unprecedented political and religious turmoil – he was appointed Archbishop of Canterbury by Queen Elizabeth I. In the same year, 1559, Parliament passed two acts of supreme importance, the *Act of Supremacy* and the *Act of Uniformity*, which together form The Elizabethan Settlement that shaped the Church of England. The *Act of Supremacy* undid the reforms made under Queen Mary, restoring the position at the end of Henry VIII's reign and re-opening the breach with Rome. *The Act of Uniformity* went further: it re-introduced the Prayer Book as the public worship of the Church of England, and it imposed severe penalties for disobedience. In these two Acts Parliament prescribed not only the political and legal position of the Church, but also how the people were to worship.

Looking back at this exactly 450 years later, it seems extraordinary that Parliament should concern itself with so personal and individual a matter as the prayers that people said, and enforce its decision upon them. This concern to control belief may seem light years from today, when religion has been relegated to the private sphere and Christianity is no longer respected as part of our culture and heritage, but it has not gone away. It finds its equivalent in an officially proclaimed multicultural orthodoxy, where political correctness seeks to control behaviour and shape

belief. But, of course, it doesn't work, neither now, nor then. In Matthew Parker's day people continued to believe what they had always believed, with many retaining their allegiance to Rome, and despite the *Act of Uniformity* there was a wide variety in ways of worship. Today, political correctness has not produced a multicultural utopia, and attracts as much ridicule as respect. Attempts to control belief produce a superficial uniformity, but they rarely go deeper and change the spirit; instead we have a triumph of style over substance, of conformity over conviction.

At least in Parker's day people still believed; the attempted uniformity was against the background of a common faith. Today people do not believe, and politically correct uniformity is, in effect, a substitute for a common faith. This loss of faith has hollowed us out; conscience no longer provides an internal control on behaviour, and we rely increasingly on external controls. When things go wrong new procedures and rules are devised to ensure that the problem 'never happens again' – how often we have heard those words! External controls may help in some areas, like child protection, but at best they are only a partial solution; what is really needed is a strengthening of our internal controls. As David Cameron said about the abuse of MP's expenses, the problem is not so much about the rules as the spirit in which they were used: 'How much needs to be paid back is not really a legal issue,' he said, 'it is a moral and an ethical issue.' The excuse, 'I've obeyed the rules; I've done nothing wrong,' is an outward, superficial defence which shows that the real issue has not touched our hearts, nor our self-seeking desires. The internal controls which should have told MPs that, whatever the rules said, their claims were wrong, were sadly lacking. (It is said that the word went around that, as a way of improving MP's pay without a formal resolution, expenses claims would not be checked too rigorously. This, of course, does not excuse unethical behaviour; it just adds institutional immorality on top of personal immorality.) Its the

same with the reckless behaviour of the banks: we could have done with tighter rules, but above all what we need is a more responsible spirit among the bankers – and, of course, this is true across the board of professional and commercial conduct: however much the rules and procedures are tightened, without a change of heart, abuses will continue.

The current, superficial attempts to shape belief have brought about a spiritual crisis – not about the detail of religious beliefs, as in Matthew Parker’s day, but more fundamentally about the way we understand the moral basis of our human nature, and the part that faith plays in our lives. For many years now we have been persuaded to see ourselves as consumers, and to believe that increasing consumption is the way to prosperity and happiness. But seeing ourselves as consumers means that we are defined by our appetites and not by our hopes. We see only part of the whole of what it means to be human, and our moral sense has withered.

Consumerism puts the individual and his or her wants centre stage, and so we become our own moral authority, effectively undermining a common moral framework regulating both public and private life. By contrast Christianity puts the common good at the centre, and that means accepting a source of authority outside of the self. In place of all the talk about values and rules we need to talk more about virtue and conscience, the things that save us from our self-seeking desires. The four cardinal virtues – prudence, temperance, fortitude and justice – point us away from ourselves and our appetites, open us to the needs of others, and remind us that we depend on one another.

The pursuit of virtue is one way of carrying out Jesus’ instruction to love one another. At the Last Supper he said to his disciples, ‘As the father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.’ (*John 15.9*) Abiding in the love of Jesus is to belong to a community that puts God at the centre, which accepts his commands as our moral authority and seeks the gifts of his spirit so

that we may live a life in which his love is passed on to others. This is the essence of the new commandment, 'Love one another as I have loved you.' Jesus' love is the love of self-sacrifice, the virtuous love that puts others before self, even to the point of laying down one's life. We tend to think of love in personal terms. Self-sacrifice for those close to us is something we can relate to, and may well have experienced, but love also has its place in public life. Bishop Simon Phipps, a former Bishop of Lincoln, said that in public and business life, love meant a willingness to take everyone's interests seriously. This moves the focus away from the individual and from his or her wants, and places the common good centre stage. Self-sacrifice becomes more demanding; we are asked to make sacrifices for those who are not close to us, and whom we may never have seen, valuing their needs and interests as our own.

This is something like the situation Peter faced at Joppa in the house of Cornelius. As a Jew, it went against his inclinations to regard the people of other nations as equally beloved of God, but as he saw the Holy Spirit poured out on Cornelius and his household, his view had to change: these gentiles were his brothers and sisters in Christ, and they too must be baptised into the Christian fellowship. The same message is in the parable of the Good Samaritan. For the priest and the levite the man lying injured by the roadside was beyond the pale, and they passed him by. It was the Samaritan, a member of a despised race, who had compassion on him and put his needs above his own. Jesus teaches us that neither race nor religious scruple can justify a refusal to help; when someone is in need, the very fact of their need puts a claim on our love – race, culture and religion notwithstanding.

Taking everyone's interests seriously would have a profound effect on our public life. It doesn't take much reflection to see how different things would be if the bankers had taken seriously the interests of their investors and staff, or if MPs had taken seriously the interests of the taxpayer, or if those who oppose efforts to

combat climate change took seriously our common interest in the survival of the planet. Taking everyone's interests seriously means seeing those we tend to regard of little or no account as our brothers and sisters, acknowledging their need as a claim on our love, and making sacrifices for them. This requires something more than the outward uniformity achieved by multiculturalism and political correctness; it requires a renewal of our inner spirit.

While attempts to impose uniformity, as in Matthew Parker's day, don't work, I think we should expect governments to acknowledge that we are spiritual beings and seek to deepen our spiritual resources. We are more than flesh and blood, appetite and desire; we have the capacity to transcend ourselves, and to live by values that are not self-serving. Indeed, our moral capacity is one of our most precious resources, just as valuable as technical and business skills – without it these other skills are misdirected and misused. Christianity, with its discipline of prayer, its ethic of love and its pursuit of virtue, putting God at the centre of life, offers a way of renewal, a way to fill the moral and spiritual void; but the marginalisation of Christianity, by both government and media, makes it hard for the Church to play its part. As Gavin Ashenden, the Chaplain at the University of Sussex, has said, we are experiencing the gradual asphyxiation of the religious spirit, a slow sucking of the oxygen out of our common life.

Restoring the flow of oxygen won't be easy, but the crisis over MP's expenses gives us an opportunity, because it points so evidently to a spiritual deficit, to the erosion of inner controls. If Matthew Parker lived in a time of turmoil, today we live in a time of judgement. With God, judgement is not about condemnation, but repentance. God holds up a mirror so that we can see what is going on, and asks us what we are going to do about it? Today we have a God-given chance to reflect on the source of our moral values and place of faith in public life.

We all live by faith, even the atheists and the secularists. Faith is what gives substance to our hopes; it shapes our way of being in the world, our attitudes to other people and to material things. For a long time now we've put our faith in material progress; it has undoubtedly brought a better life for many (though by no means for all), but it hasn't fulfilled our hopes. As Christians we say that a man-made faith doesn't work; its values don't go deep enough. We need something more dependable, a faith that shapes a way of life which feeds the spirit, helps us to grow in virtue, to work for the common good, putting others before self. We who seek to abide in the love of Christ need to pray hard for this. It may not seem much, but prayer is not without effect; as Jesus said, it can move mountains, and we are in the mountain moving business!

II Give Us Sunshine!

Norwich Cathedral, 15 May 2010

THESE SERMONS, given each year in four Norfolk churches, were founded in the sixteenth century by Archbishop Parker, himself a Norfolk man, out of concern for the state of the Norfolk clergy, who, it seems, had become less than conscientious in their duties – perhaps the result of confusion and demoralisation in the aftermath of Mary Tudor. What is surprising is not that the clergy were confused, but the expectation that a course of four sermons would sort them out! How times have changed. Now its politicians, not churchmen, who carry our hopes. Last Thursday (*12 May 2010*) the front page of *The Sun* had a photo of Morecambe and Wise doing a dance routine with the faces of David Cameron and Nick Clegg superimposed. The headline read, ‘Give us sunshine!’

It is not recorded what was said to Matthew Parker when he became Archbishop of Canterbury, but in the turbulent times in which he came to office, I imagine a bit of sunshine would have been welcome! Then, as now, the expectations were considerable, and life was set to get stormy rather than sunny. In the reign of Elizabeth I religious matters bore heavily on national policy, and her new archbishop was expected to secure the Elizabethan Settlement, which effectively founded today’s Church of England. Then there was no debate about the existence of God, or the spiritual nature of human beings; these were accepted as given. The debate was about the forms of worship and church order that would best promote the spiritual life of the people and give stability to the nation. If there were to be sunny times, the nation must first get its relationship with God right. We think differently these days: sunny times depend on getting the economy right; God

has no part to play in sorting out our national life; religion is not the way to the sunlit uplands.

But the marginalisation of religious faith, so much a characteristic of Britain and Europe today, ought to give us pause for thought – not just because the general assumption that the future is secular is now widely questioned, nor because the rise of Islam has made us re-think the place of faith in national life, but more particularly because religious faith offers both a moral compass, and insights into human nature, which we need at this time, and which we have all but lost. It is agreed on all sides that the most urgent problem facing the new government is the financial deficit, but behind this lies an ethical deficit – or, more accurately, a spiritual deficit – no less urgent in its need for action. We need to get the economy right, but we also need to get our ethics right. We need a new spirit.

David Cameron touched on this in a speech he made four years ago. He said, 'It's time we admitted there's more to life than money, and it's time we focussed not just on GDP [gross domestic product], but GWB: general well-being.' For years now it has been apparent that although the general level of wealth had risen, people do not feel that their happiness has also increased. It feels more cloudy than sunny. The Church, of course, has been saying this for years, indeed for centuries, and the Bible for millennia. Most chillingly, Psalm 106 describes God's response to the single-minded pursuit of self-interest in these words: 'He gave them over to their desires, and sent leanness withal into their hearts.' That is not just an assessment of the state of the people of Israel in the fifth century BC, but the statement of a universal moral rule. If we put ourselves at the centre of our lives, and make satisfying our desires our overriding aim, we shall be diminished as people; leanness will enter our hearts. As well as a new politics we need a new spirit. If policies are to be developed to increase general well being, they cannot ignore the spiritual aspect of human nature. We may long

for sunshine but life remains cloudy in large part because for too long political debate has been conducted as though people have no soul.

Our soul, or spirit, is what gives us our individuality – our gifts and our character, our capacity for relationships and for moral judgements. The way our spirit expresses itself determines our spirituality. We all have a spirituality, that is, our way of being in the world. Spirituality is not just for religious people. Some spiritualities are religious, but the dominant spirituality today is secular, a materialistic way of being. We have been persuaded that the way to happiness is through acquisition, increasing our wealth and possessions; we are encouraged to see ourselves as consumers, that is people who are defined by our appetites. If we want sunshine, the key thing that needs to change is our spirituality.

Christian spirituality is based on a different vision of happiness, and believes that we are defined by our ultimate destiny. We get a glimpse of that destiny in the Book of Revelation. The Seer, John, hears a voice that says to him, 'I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.' (*Revelation 22.13*) The voice speaks of an ultimate reality, something by which we can measure our mortal life. I think most people feel that there is more to life than material possessions; that there is a greater reality beyond what we experience through our senses, a reality of which our experience of human love gives us a foretaste. There is a part of life that is real, that we cannot weigh or measure or value in monetary terms. The voice describes that ultimate reality in which we live and move and have our being in personal terms: '*I am* the Alpha and the Omega ...' And, as St John the Apostle records, Jesus prayed that we, like him, might know this personal relationship with the Father: 'As you, Father, are in me, and I in you, so also may they be in us. ... The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one as we are one; I in them and

you in me, may they be perfectly one.' (*John 17.21–23*) Our destiny is a relationship of love, not a life crammed with possessions.

Many people today, and not just in the Church, are finding the way to a personal relationship with God and a deeper spirituality in the teachings of St Benedict, a monk who lived some 1500 years ago, and whose followers built this cathedral. Benedict speaks across the ages about the personal qualities and the spirituality we need to grow as people and to join together to pursue a common goal. He offers a framework for life that helps us meet the challenges of the times, and his teaching finds a response not just in the Church, but also in the secular world of business and commerce. Benedictine spirituality is founded on three vows, solemn promises that bind the monks to a particular way of life. They are not the usual vows of poverty, chastity and obedience – the Franciscan vows – but obedience, stability, and continuing conversion.

Promising obedience to Scripture and to his superiors, the monk vows to listen: to God, and to the community. He acknowledges a source of authority outside of himself, accepting that he is not the centre of the world. Stability commits him to a community, to working through relationships or situations that he finds difficult, rather than trying to flee from them. Stability is about putting down roots that hold him steady and nourish him, helping him to resist the pull of a rootless, transient society. A life defined by consumption is a life that is running away. Continuing conversion is about being open to the new, allowing the raw material of our being to be shaped by the possibilities of growth in oneself, and also by the lives of others. It is in effect a vow to change, and never to remain still in either self-satisfied fulfilment or in self-denying despair. Esther de Waal has summed up these three vows in three succinct questions: Are you listening? Are you escaping? Are you open to change?

Benedictine spirituality offers a world of change a way of living rooted in values and attitudes that are changeless. But to do so requires inner strength, and Benedict expected his monks to grow in virtue, an inner disposition to do right. We all have the capacity for virtue, just as we all have the capacity for love, but it needs nurturing. Humility is the essential Benedictine virtue. It is not doing yourself down, but rather, coming to a proper appreciation of yourself both before God and in the community. Humility is a strength not a weakness, and it is the foundation of a virtuous model of leadership, so much in need today. St Benedict says to us that the pursuit of virtue, within a life shaped by the values of obedience, stability and openness to change, is the way that we shall find a new spirit – a glimpse of the sun! We see the power of this spirituality at work in the story of Paul setting free the slave-girl whose gift of telling fortunes was used by her masters for their personal profit (*Acts 16.16ff*). She was set free not only from the evil powers that imprisoned her spirit, but also from the evil men who were exploiting her. If its sunshine we're after, we too need to be released from the grip of the false gods who have us in their power, and from a spirituality that imprisons us rather than sets us free. And this gift of God cannot be constrained or imprisoned; it will make lives new, as it did for the slave-girl.

I don't know what Archbishop Parker wanted his clergy to learn, but were he alive today, perhaps he would want them to be reminded of the treasures of their tradition which can meet the needs of those who are spiritually thirsty. 'Give us sunshine!' Well, we may not be able to promise sunshine in the skies, but we can promise sunshine in the heart, a new spirit, the water of life which is God's gift to all who turn to him:

Let everyone who is thirsty come.

Let whoever wishes accept the water of life as a gift.

Revelation 22.17