10 March 2019: Choral Matins
The First Sunday of Lent
Canon Professor Carol Harrison, Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity
‘The Gravity of Grace’

‘The Lord has told you mortals what is good… only to act justly, to love loyalty and to walk humbly with your God.’

Can you remember the last time you were lost? That moment when you realised that you were no longer on track; when the landmarks you expected just weren’t there; when you had to stop and reconsider – check a GPS or Sat Nav, or even look at your map, get a compass out, find your coordinates; the moment when you had to turn, and hopefully return to the right route. They’re moments when your heart sinks; when you wonder how you could be so confused and go so badly wrong; moments of confusion, doubt or just blind panic.

That moment when we stop, reconsider and turn to change direction is the one I would like to think about this morning. And of course, you are now waiting for me to say: and this is what we did when we began the season of Lent on Ash Wednesday; this is what we must do in the 40 days leading up to Holy Week and Easter; this is what Lent means: it is a time when we acknowledge that we have gone wrong and with a sinking heart turn, try to get ourselves back on track. Well, sort of.

What I really want to suggest is that that moment when we change direction is not a one off, isolated moment: rather it is one that characterises who we are, how we were created, and how we are meant to live. It should, in fact, be our permanent state. Let me give a slightly more dramatic illustration than a gentle walk in the countryside. What if we found ourselves on a tightrope: underneath us there is a vast, dark, formless, endless abyss. The only way forward is to look towards our goal, to believe it is there, to walk step by step towards it, to continually orientate our sinking hearts, panic stricken minds and feeble bodies towards it, not losing concentration, straining every nerve to balance, to
look ahead, not to fall. The effort is all consuming, but the alternative is to fall into the abyss and be forever lost.

What if this is how we were created to be and how we are meant to live? Is life meant to be a continual turning; one continual Lent? There is a long tradition of Christian reflection that teaches precisely that: that in the beginning God created us from nothing; that we came into being and remain in being precisely by turning towards our Creator. It teaches that the moment when God says ‘Let there be light’ is the moment when we are called into being, respond to that call by turning towards our Creator, and in the moment of turning, receive our existence or form. So, our creation, conversion and formation is one moment, one simultaneous movement of coming into being. To remain in existence this moment – this movement or turning- must be a continuous one; a continual conversion towards the source of our existence. This is what human life is.

I hope this doesn’t sound too theological. What I really want to say is that as created human beings we are less like wanderers in the fields, getting lost and finding our way back, but more like tightrope walkers, poised above the abyss of nothingness. We need to devote every ounce of our focus and concentration; every movement of mind and body, to turning towards our goal. For if we turn away, if we start to think of ourselves rather than our goal, then we fall. The tightrope walker would fall into the abyss; we human beings fall back into nothingness, our being is diminished, and we lose our created form and beauty, becoming deformed and ugly.

But we can’t live our lives like this, can we? Can we? The single-minded, single-hearted, focus of the tightrope walker is all-consuming, exhausting, and allows for nothing but a will fixed entirely on the goal, a desire to achieve it, a conscious effort in every moment to direct themselves towards it. What would our lives be like if we lived in this way? The best example I can think of is of those who have been called to devote their entire lives to God and who have responded to that call, single-mindedly and single heartedly devoting themselves, their minds, hearts and bodies, to Him. Monks, nuns, hermits, martyrs, saints and priests. These are our Christian tightrope walkers.

But what of us? Well, even having these glorious examples of Christian life set before us is a help – or is it? Does it not just make us feel wanting, weak, feeble, frail and faltering? Well yes, but I think that is how we are meant to feel. Looked at from the outside the monastic life, martyrdom, saintly courage and virtue, priestly devotion, might seem like
impossible achievements, but that is because they are impossible - at least, they are impossible if it were not for grace.

I have not mentioned grace until now, but everything I have described has presupposed it: we would literally be nothing if it were not for grace. It is because of God’s grace that we were created; because of grace that we are given the single-heartedness to maintain our focus on Him and give our hearts, minds and bodies to Him. None of this is something we do; it is of God, from God and towards God. God calls us into existence and inspires in us a response, not only in the beginning, but in every moment of our lives. They are a continual, never-ending turning towards God because that turning is the very source of our existence and our continuing in existence. This is not something we choose or achieve, but something we are given. This is as true of monks, nuns, hermits, martyrs, saints and priests as of us. It is the tightrope walk we all follow - held, balanced, directed, only by the gravity of God’s grace.

So when we talk of turning towards God in Lent I think that what we are really referring to is the movement of God’s grace within us, calling us and enabling us to respond, because He inspires within us a love, delight and desire for Himself - not least through his revelation of Himself to us in the life and death of His Son.

What is required of us, then, are not superhuman acts of spiritual endurance, a monastic life, martyrdom, sainthood, or even ordination – but humility: an acknowledgement that everything we are and everything we do is a gift of grace – of God’s creating grace and – when we have sinned, fallen way, diminished ourselves, made ourselves ugly, and are moving towards nothingness – of His redeeming, saving grace revealed to us in Christ. Our Lenten disciplines – our fasting, prayer, repentance, confession, meditation, service to others – are no more and no less than a way of cultivating that humility: of acknowledging our complete dependence upon God, and of throwing ourselves upon the gravity of His grace. In other words, Lent, and its particular practices, is simply a reminder of what our whole life, in every moment, should be like: a turning to the one who calls us into being; a turning to God’s outstretched hands on the cross to save and redeem us, inspired by a love which is from God – indeed, which is God. This is what it is ‘to walk humbly with God’.

John Donne movingly captures this humble turning of a sinful human being, aware that they are born in sin and have continued to wallow in sin, dragging others down with them. He describes their faltering faith, vitiated by fear; their helpless abandon, throwing
themselves upon God’s grace, revealed in the light of the Son, in a poem which we sometimes sing as hymn. Let us pray it this Lent:

Wilt thou forgive that sin where I begun,
   Which was my sin, though it were done before?
Wilt thou forgive that sin, through which I run,
   And do run still, though still I do deplore?
   When thou hast done, thou hast not done,
      For I have more.
Wilt thou forgive that sin which I have won
   Others to sin, and made my sin their door?
Wilt thou forgive that sin which I did shun
   A year or two, but wallow’d in, a score?
   When thou hast done, thou hast not done,
      For I have more.
I have a sin of fear, that when I have spun
   My last thread, I shall perish on the shore;
But swear by thyself, that at my death thy Son
   Shall shine as he shines now, and heretofore;
   And, having done that, thou hast done;
      I fear no more.