



Christ Church Cathedral

OXFORD

16 August 2020: Sunday Worship

The Tenth Sunday after Trinity

Romans 11:1–2a, 29–32; Matthew 15:10–28

Canon Professor Carol Harrison, Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity

‘What comes from the heart’

When we say of someone that ‘their heart isn’t in it’ or that they are speaking or acting half-heartedly, what we usually mean is that they aren’t doing something because they really want to but because they feel obliged to; they lack any real motivation; they’re acting grudgingly, perhaps out of a sense of obligation or duty, rather than a real desire.

But Jesus’ words in our Gospel this morning make it clear that it is not just what we do that matters but why we do it; what motivates us. ‘It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person us but what comes out of the mouth that defiles... what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles’.

He has in mind the Pharisees’ insistence on food laws; on outward observance; on external, visible markers of piety and purity. Failure to observe them, they insisted, defiled a person. But what, Jesus is asking, about their inward state; their motivation; the reason for their observances. What is in their hearts?

Why we do something matters. As T.S. Eliot has Thomas Becket say in his play *Murder in the Cathedral* ‘The last temptation is the greatest treason: to do the right deed for the wrong reason’.

Do we observe the law and obey rules out of fear or love? Do we act as we should because we fear punishment and seek a reward or because we love and desire it and cannot not do it? Do we act in a calculated, self-serving way, or in a spontaneous, other-centred way? Do we act because we have to or because we want to?

This isn’t as easy to answer as it might at first seem. If a true motivation comes from within; if it is spontaneous, uncalculated, rising up from us unconstrained, how can we be said to choose it? We

can choose to obey laws and rules; our rational minds and wills can deliberate, weigh up the pros and cons, the gains and losses, and then opt for what appears to be most beneficial – even if it isn't what we would really want and even if we then act half-heartedly. But what comes from the heart works under a different law: it cannot be deliberated, weighed or calculated. Rather it compels, it moves, it directs, it inspires; it rises up unbidden, unreflected upon, and moves us to act whether we choose to or not.

But this is all rather disconcerting. For when Jesus identifies what it is that truly defiles us He not only rejects external things, but locates what defiles us in our hearts. Wrong motivations such as malice, anger or slander and wrong acts, such as murder, adultery, fornication, theft and false witness ... arise just as unbidden, just as spontaneously, just as intuitively and just as forcefully from the heart as right motivations, such as patience, kindness or love. Why we do something matters because it is this that has the power to cause us to speak and act in ways that are harmful, not just to others but to ourselves.

If we slander someone, talk behind their backs; if we are filled with malice and want to see them suffer, then not only our minds but our hearts are filled with slander and malice. We are defiled by what comes out of our mouths. Our minds as well as our hearts and wills are turned away from God. We diminish not only others but ourselves.

In this context, Jesus doesn't mention what comes out of the heart which purifies a person, strengthens them, hallows them, sanctifies them. Paul does this for us in I Corinthians in his well-known encomium on love. It is a love which is patient and kind, never boastful or conceited, rude or selfish; a love which delights in the truth.

Where does this sort of love come from? From the heart certainly, but how we can ensure that it is this which arises unbidden, spontaneously and with a force that moves us to speak and act rightly rather than wrongly?

The sort of love Paul describes may indeed be unsought, unbidden and spontaneous, but it does not come from nowhere. It is, in reality, the result of long practice; of a will or heart that constantly turns itself towards God in order to receive from Him what it is, what it will become, how it will speak and act. In other words, it springs from constant attention: from prayer, from single minded, single hearted devotion, from listening to God in the Scriptures, from referring everything we are, everything we do, everything we will or desire to God, until such acts become, as it were, written into us, habitual, and arise as unbidden and spontaneously as our breathing.

And of course, the fact that we can do this, and the reason why we do this, is love; it is a love of God that comes from God. We love God because He is love, the source of love, the love with which we love him. What is required of us is that continual turning towards Him to love Him with the love with which He loves us. This is what comes from the heart and what purifies and sanctifies it, rather than defiles it.

We are practicing it now in this Eucharist, as we do every Sunday, as we turn towards the alter to receive the love of God, given to us in the body of Christ, uniting us with Him and in Him, so that whatever we will or do comes from a good heart.

Amen