

Sermon for Ash Wednesday

Revd Canon Charles Jenkin – 17th February 2021

Joel 2.1-2,12-17; Psalm 51.1-18; 2 Corinthians 5.20b-6.10; Matthew 6.1-6,16-21

We entreat you on behalf of Christ, writes St Paul, be reconciled to God. So are you.... reconciled to God?

There are, I think, a lot of people in this world who are not really reconciled to God. This is not because they are not Christians; some already are. Others are not Christian simply because they are not reconciled to God. They do not like what they think they have heard about God. They do not like the history of people who say they are the people of God.

In truth, such people have probably never actually met the real God, as revealed through Jesus Christ. Instead, they reject a caricature of the God they have not known. Evangelism is quite well described as the process of telling people about who God really is, and what God is really like: loving, accepting, compassionate and merciful, especially to those who find life difficult.

Even people of faith can labour for years and years under burdens of judgment they think God has laid upon them, when actually he hasn't burdened them in such way at all, and all God wants to do is be reconciled to them. Or people are just disappointed with life, or themselves, or the Church, and vaguely blame God.

Being reconciled to God is quite closely connected to be reconciled with yourself; with being able to live with your own imperfections and failures and wrong doings, and learning not to let the shame and anxiety of these things drive you to depression, and learning not to be afraid of them. For Christians, supremely, the love of God and the mercy of God enables us to live with all the disappointments of who we actually are, so that despite these things the image of God in us may shine out, more and more.

We can tell that the world is full of people who are not reconciled to themselves, because of all the anger that is so often expressed these days. People who are reconciled to God and themselves don't become internet trolls. People who are reconciled to God and themselves don't resort to vicious levels of racism and scapegoating. People who are reconciled to God and themselves don't feel they have to sit constantly in judgment on fellow human beings.

It's interesting that Jesus really wasn't keen on people who were judgmental, like the Pharisees. Judge not, said Jesus, lest you be judged. This is not about not having moral principles; good moral principles are essential to good societies. It's about how you handle those principles, and how you handle your relationships with those with whom you deeply disagree.

Indeed for example the whole woke movement which has become so intolerant of anyone who doesn't share its particular views, probably has some of its roots in people's own lack of reconciliation with God and themselves. And that goes for other kinds of very judgemental politics too. Maybe there is an epidemic of people not being reconciled to God and themselves.

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Are you reconciled to God? Today, Ash Wednesday is a day of penitence, and the proper practice of Christian penitence is always, first and foremost, an encounter with the love of God. It leads to reconciliation with God, through Jesus Christ. But just as important, it leads to reconciliation with yourself through Jesus Christ, and through the love of God. Which makes this day, Ash Wednesday, supremely a day of peace. Amen.

CJ. 17.02.21