

Sermon for 4th March 2007 11.00 am

Solemn Mass, St Matthew's, Westminster

Second Sunday of Lent

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

I am not going to let Father Peter outdo me in his succinct description of the one sermon he would like to preach. You may remember his words last week – if he had one sermon to preach it would be very brief and would be "God is love". Well, mine is this: "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again". To me, when we proclaim the mystery of faith in these or similar words, the entire reason for our own joy and our own gathering together comes into focus for me: "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again." Should I say "amen" and sit down, well no, I had better not, especially if I want to be ordained to the Permanent Diaconate on 30th June. More is expected and I will now, in the next few minutes, attempt that by offering you my version of what the one sermon I would like to preach, if I only had one sermon to preach, this would be it, I think...

One sermon, one chance, what would I say? I guess the image of a journey seems the most appropriate, especially in Lent, as we think of Jesus' time in the wilderness, certainly an arduous journey. I have just come back from a bit of an arduous journey myself from Tanzania and Zanzibar. Some of you may have read about that journey in the news. It was not exactly without some

difficulties, but one of the most interesting parts of it was what I had to take with me to make it a proper journey, to be a successful journey in my own work. Way too many suitcases, filled with electronic gadgets and batteries and all sorts of cameras and equipment, plugs and more plugs and all sorts of things that I just had to have. And there was the other bag that had the pills that would stop "this" and would start "that", the pills that would prevent malaria and the ones that would make me sleep, not to mention mosquito repellent and the emergency digestive biscuits. This week I am off to Angola, war torn and poverty, more of the same yet different.

But we are on a journey; sometimes the simplest journey in central London can be a ghastly thing. During the summer months we are told to take water on the tube, just in case, it's kind of frightening. In case of what? I love being at Kings Cross and seeing the tourist (yes American) taking photos of the platform where the Hogwarts Express leaves with young Harry. (who I guess in Equus is not so young anymore).

But as Christians gather for Christian worship, knowing too that we are on a journey, to the time and place when Christ will come again for us, to receive us, to take us home, I'd like you to take a small bag and open it and put in the following things: a bible passage - it is my hope that everybody here in the parish has a bible at home, if you (esp the kids) don't have one and you need

one, I'm sure we can find you one. I don't care what version it is, but we as Anglicans have often been represented out our lack of care for scriptures. How could anyone say that when our services of worship are full, not only readings of scriptures, but all the images of scriptures in our prayers. The bible is not some book that God wrote and sends through the air to land on the shelf of Waterstones, but through the Holy Spirit the Church gave us the canon of scripture to help us learn the story of God, our story, God's story, and more particularly the great revelation of God in Jesus Christ who is the living word of God. Again, scholars, clergy and bishops decided what we have as the Bible today was that book, God's word, we need to help us on our journey.

I cant resist a story from on of my friends in Canterbury, Ria, who was a Salvationist before embracing cathedral Anglicanism. She told of a recent visit to Holland where her sister is the supreme general of the Salvation Army (and I do admire much the work of the SA..) but at the meeting – only 3 verses of scripture were read, the defining lines of the Wedding at Cana miracle. Her supreme general sister than embarked on a 45 min sermon on changing water into wine. Approaching her sister, Ria said, why did it take you 45 mins to talk about changing water into wine and the exultation thereof...you salvationists do not even drink wine!

The passages I ask you to put in that bag of yours are from Isaiah:

Isaiah 41: 8 and Isaiah 26: 10

I have a friend called Rose and in the early 1980s she went through a terrible depression which lasted almost 2 years. She never missed a day's work, never flinched from her responsibilities, but was tormented by thoughts and disturbances in her mind that actually drove her to the brink of disaster at times. Her mind was cluttered, it never stopped producing negative and harmful thoughts. She went to a counsellor at our cathedral in Chicago and the wise Welsh priest who ran it introduced her to that verse of scripture from Isaiah: "Thou will keep in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee". She later told me that almost no-one knew she was going through any depression at all, but that verse of scripture she repeated constantly sometimes 2,000 or 3,000 a day, just to keep stabilised. The power of the word of God as recorded in scripture - something to think about. Then, make room for the Book of Common Prayer, Common Worship. Again, we have such a unique and blessed heritage as Anglicans, and yet so many clergy violate their own ordination vows with these bizarre services that do not reflect the heritage we have once delivered to the saints. The power of common prayer, the lack of that common prayer I think is what has really hurt our communion, our Anglican Communion that is. And nowadays, you don't even have to buy it, you can take it off the internet. Where would we be without the Prayer of Ash Wednesday,

Something to ponder for the journey, especially if you ever doubt God's love for you and for me. I remember in my own life, I went through a time that was less than pleasant and I would wonder, day after day, what would the morning bring, what would make me know that I am fully alive each morning when I woke up? And I remembered the words from the prayerbook: "Glory be to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, Holy Ghost, as it was in the beginning is now and ever shall be, world without end, Amen." I stood up every morning and I shouted that out because I knew that it meant I was fully alive and fully ready to face the day. The next thing I want you to bring in your bag is a hymn text.

Wesley's Love Divine: Our hymnody is one of our greatest treasures and is often called the people's book of theology and prayer:

"Love divine all loves excelling, joy of heaven to earth come down, fix in us thy humble dwelling, all thy faithful mercies crown".

"Jesus, thou art all compassion, pure unbounded love thou art, visit us with thy salvation, enter every trembling heart."

I must admit a favourite hymn is hard. I already have picked my funeral hymns and let me tell you, it might be more like songs of praise than a requiem.

How about: "Ye saints who toil below, adore your heavenly king, and onward as ye go, some joyful anthem sing. Take what he gives and praise him still through good or ill, whoever lives."

Words of a puritan no less. Or the hymns today: Father Hear the

prayer and All who would seek. Wow. But what of my criticism, JESUS STORY, song on the screen.....I am not against more expression of worship, but we must learn these texts and have them become part of who we are..they arise in our thinking more than you will ever imagine..do you ever just find yourself singing a hymn...I do...

Now in your bag take something remember your mother. Yes, your earthly mother will be fine, but also your mother, the Virgin Mary, do not be afraid of the Virgin Mary. One of the wonderful points in the worship here at St Matthew's is when we sing the Angelus. When you look around, which you're not supposed to do but I do sometimes, and see the young children and people of all ages singing, I realise just how easy it is to ask a mother for her prayers. We ask our mothers for a lot of things, but in the Virgin Mary we have the mother of God, the mother of Christ who gave her entire being to be a chosen vessel for God. I remember a very militant protestant person saying to me, "Well it could have been Sally", indeed it could have been but it wasn't it was Mary, and Mary risked life, she certainly had a ruined reputation within her community for what transpired within her, yet Jesus loves his mother and so must we: "Woman, behold thy son; Son, behold thy mother" is a message to us all. Mary's not magic, she's no substitute for Christ, but, she has completed the journey. If Mary isn't glorified, how could any of us expect to be? So let's pray with her, let's ask her prayers and let's remember her with

thanksgiving, indeed all of the people who sacrifice for others. It's not an easy task.

The Psalms: the treasure of treasure. They are lovely in plainsong or metrical versions or our beloved Anglican chant but alive also in their very words. The psalm for the bag is Psalm 13.

The psalmist knows trouble and despair but alas the end is glorious, it is a safe place, it is where God leads. So many psalms tell such passionate tales. What a gift!

So there you have it. Not profound, yet I trust your bag for the journey might not be too overflowing to take in these items (or ones similar to them.)

Travel is not all glory, especially in the back of the plane or train or bus, but it provides us with adventure, release, encounter, surprise and a goal – a destination. In this great Lenten season fix your eyes on him who is the Love divine come down from heaven, who can fix our minds into the realms of calm and peace, and as in Ps 13, never forgets us. Mary and the saints are with you too. So are the prayers of those near and far, family, friends and fellow passengers.

The fare never changes, repentance, forgiveness, charity and faith are what it takes to bring to the port of call, abundant life, here and now, and always and celebrated so fully at Easter. Please remember the new rules say only one bag and never leave it unattended. Good advice. Travel well.

Amen.

