

Sermon Lent 1 Year B 2018

This holy season of Lent we now undertake together, is presented to us a 'season of grace'. It is a time in which we are called to more intently heed the Lord's command such as we hear in the Gospel today: to repent, to turn to the Lord, to seek his forgiveness. It is by the power of God's grace we recognise our faults and failings. And by the power of his grace seek to amend our lives. Grace, in the classic definition, is *the free gift of God*. But, as with any gift given so freely, abundantly, generously, we can at times take it for granted. What is given at such a cost – the cost Christ's own life – we can come to treat with cold indifference.

It is this cheapening of grace that was of such a concern to the German Lutheran pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was a founding member of what was called 'The confessing church', those faithful Christians who stood in defiance to the Nazi takeover of Germany. As his beloved country – and large parts of his church – succumbed to the Hitler's seductions, he saw first-hand the end-result of so cheapening God's grace that the faith becomes something completely other. "*Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession...Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.*"

So often in the life of faith it is those things which are challenging, disconcerting, which cause some discomfort or the prick of conscience which are the first to go. It is the consistent temptation in the life of faith to rob it of its force and vitality; to tame it; to neuter it; to strip it of its power. We can remove layer after layer. But like an onion, in the end there will be nothing left. This was Bonhoeffer's insight. Strip the faith of its challenges and we rob it of its core message. Minimalism may be a trend in architecture and design. But it doesn't serve well a vibrant and vital faith. Minimalism, really, is the great scourge in the life of faith. So often, what was once considered the absolute *minimum* in practice of the faith is now experienced by most as the absolute *maximum*. From the earliest days, faithful, devout believers would gather at least twice on Sundays. And Sunday not being a publicly observed rest day, this would be before work and after work. Faithful and devout households would say prayers morning and night *every day*. This was not considered exceptional or special or extraordinary, but *usual*. Now, we are lucky to gather faithful once on a Sunday.

One of Cranmer's great gifts to the church was to encourage the faithful to share once more in the *daily* prayer of the church in Morning prayer and evensong. Even in the living memories of some of you, Sunday consisted of early communion, choral matins and then later in the afternoon choral evensong. Again. Not exceptional or rare. But usual. Now, last week we had the first choral evensong for the year. Magnificent music and the choir in good voice. A fine, beautiful offering of worship. But about a dozen in the congregation. Now, if you want this church to be one in which a choral tradition is maintained and fostered, you - yes *you* - need to support it! It needs to be part of your praying habit, your discipline of prayer.

But supporting the public prayer of this church is more than just keeping the show going. It is about giving authentic witness to our faith. Sharing in the praying life of the church shows that *we believe* in the faith of the church, and that it is that praying life which orients our life, which is the priority in our life. Sunday morning worship *cannot be* maximum, the only expression of our faith. Morning and evening prayer each day, I would suggest to you is the minimum expression of our faith. If you haven't

done that before, well, Lent is a great time to start, and any number of resources to help you! And from tonight onward there will be weekly prayers and devotions on Sundays in this church. Come and join! Not because its extreme, of fanatical or particularly pious. But because Christians - if they take their faith seriously, and so that the grace they have received doesn't become cheap, so we don't settle only for a minimal faith - will *want* to pray, will *want* to be shaped by the rhythms the patterns, the habits of prayer, both communally and at home.

A similar cheapening in the practice of the faith we can see in the discipline of fasting. Once, a vital part of Christian practice. Now, even in traditions such as our own, all but disappeared. *The Didache*, (the teachings of the Apostles) is the earliest surviving Christian document outside the New Testament and possibly written before some parts of the New Testament. It witnesses to the importance of fasting for Christians in the first century. Matthew's Gospel, in the portion we heard on Ash Wednesday, doesn't say, *if* you fast, or *should* you happen to fast, but *when you fast*. If we think about fasting in Lent nowadays at all, it tends to be the simple of reduction things completely luxurious, such as chocolates or sweets. But our fasting should be such that every inconvenience, every hunger pang, every little sacrifice brings to mind Christ and his cross, so we remember the cost of grace.

If people know anything about Islam, they know it is a faith in which people pray five times a day and fast rigorously through the month of Ramadan. One of the reasons that religion has proved so attractive to a growing number of people in this country is because of the vigour by which it is practiced. How marvellous it would be if when people saw us, they too could be converted by the enthusiasm and vigour we undertake the disciplines of the faith! We must never underestimate the evangelical potential of a faith-filled life lived joyously and enthusiastically.

My brothers and sisters, don't allow your approach to God and your life of faith casually or indifferently! I am personally staggered at the large and consistent number of folk here who turn up here late for mass! Or those who linger in the car park before mass. Sometimes half of you get into church after mass has started! I am not sure how you think you can make your prayerful preparation for communion and say your personal devotions if that is the case! I am afraid all this suggests that we are not approaching our faith with the eagerness and fervour the cross deserves. I say all this not because I think less of you, or love you less, but because a true, loving pastor will want to draw his people to deeper, more fervent faith.

So often we complain and moan about the lack of faith, the abandonment of faith in our culture. The true tragedy *is not* that the dominant culture has given up and walked away from the faith. It is that those who still claim allegiance so often practice a faith, so weak, timid and tame. The true tragedy is that so often our own hearts and lives have not been converted. What hope, then, to attract or appeal to anyone else! But, my brothers and sisters, this is the season of grace. Lent is a further gift God gives us. Yes, so often we are so slow and reluctant to accept what God offers. But the invitation is there. I highlight in the pew sheet today some of things offered here to help revitalise our faith at this time. Will they earn us brownie points in heaven? Will they make us a more virtuous? No. Will they give us opportunity to become more earnest, more eager, more fervent yes; opportunity to join ourselves more intently to the cross of Christ.

A wholehearted practice of the faith - a serious faith, a costly faith - is the only kind of faith worth signing up for and committing to. But we do so ultimately because it is honouring to God. A weak, half-hearted, indifferent, casual faith is not honouring to

God. Of course, we all struggle. We all face temptations. But the *good news* is that it's not about us or our efforts. Hear again Christ's first words: *repent*. Turn to the Lord. In this season of grace, let us trust and accept and grow in God's gift of grace. Amen.