

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 24 Year C 2022

An unusual fundraiser has been doing the rounds in some church circles of late. The fundraising initiative is for parishioners to nominate a hymn they would like to have banned in their congregation for an entire year. The highest bidder wins and their nominated hymn is not sung for twelve months! Now, there is no need for such a fundraiser here. We are blessed with a very wide hymn selection indeed. Our director of music is very careful in the selection of hymns, that they be from the breadth of the 'hymn canon'. But you may be aware that in other places some hymns get - shall we say - overused and oversung. No such danger here, I am pleased to say.

However, if I were ministering in another context, and such a fundraiser were proposed, I *would* nominate a hymn to ban for a year. That would be Amazing Grace. When I was priest in Apollo Bay, almost every funeral I celebrated there included Amazing Grace. So much so that I got fed up with it. But more than anything, this probably says more about the death of hymn singing in our culture, or communal singing in general. There is so little now of a shared culture between believers and the wider culture. Something like Amazing Grace just lingers in the cultural consciousness. How much longer who knows? The second most popular funeral hymn was The Lord's my Shepherd.

So, I have given firm instructions to my family and friends that Amazing Grace is *not* to be sung at my funeral. Though I must admit this aversion can only be for aesthetic reasons. Because theologically it is quite sound. And we ought - all of us - be moved by the story that lay behind it, of the slave trader John Newton who in a fierce storm made a vow to God to deliver him. He was saved from this storm, was convicted of sin, became a convinced abolitionist, and dedicated the rest of his life to the service of God. Our catholic sensibilities may be somewhat averse to this enthusiastic expression of personal faith. But that's more the pity! Emotional expressions of gratitude for the saving power of God at work in our lives might not suit every personality. But it certainly is appropriate for some. We would do well to allow more scope for such expressions in our faith and practice.

Now, some make the claim that a hymn like Amazing Grace is improper for a modern, enlightened Christian because of its talk of God saving wretches. But of course, that is to misunderstand - or misrepresent - Christian theology! We are wretches!

And the sooner we wake up to that - and cease those delusions that actually we are all pretty decent, nice people - the better! Because to deny the truth of our wretchedness is just a short step away to denying the need for any saviour at all. Now, it seems that I am making quite a good argument for a hymn I wish to ban. But as I mentioned, my aversion is really just aesthetic, an aversion to a good thing overdone. Importantly John Newton did not stop at his wretchedness and neither does Christian theology. God saves us, heals and redeems us *despite* our wretchedness. He saves, heals and delivers us *from* our wretchedness. This is expressed very powerfully and simply in the hymn: *I was lost and now am found, was blind but now I see.*

This experience of lostness, of course, is a key human experience, maybe even a universal human experience. Even if we are not willing to put our hand up wholeheartedly to an idea of wretchedness, we should at least be able to acknowledge the truth of *lostness*; that experience of alienation, of listlessness, of abandonment, of disorientation, and confusion. Many of us will be feeling something of this following the death of Her Late Majesty, Queen Elizabeth. The lostness that comes from grief at the death of the Queen may at first seem quite strange. Why should we feel this way for someone whom most of us, I imagine, never met, never spoke to, never had direct interaction with in any way? Why should we feel this way for someone whose life was so remote from that of most of us, whose experience of life was so strange and different to ours? Yet at the same time, as many commentators have noted already, she *was* part of our lives. She provided that constancy so often referred to. She was a figure of stability and calmness in the midst of the storms and changes of life. Her death sort of feels like the death of the grandmother of the world. And with her passing ends an age - an Elizabethan age - that will never return. That age is over. Something has ended.

This all goes toward that sense of disorientation, this feeling of lostness. This lostness comes precisely because of a disorientation. It comes from going down a path - wanted or not, chosen or not - that takes us from the safe comfort of what is known and familiar and to new and unknown territory. And this lostness from grief is not just an emotion, but a powerfully real experience. And it is an experience of disorientation. This is why it so shakes us, unsettles us. We feel this sense of disorientation at death because something *has* been lost. Again, it all seems terribly irrational. But this just goes to remind us we are not just rational beings. We are also emotional beings and spiritual beings, and these experiences are real on that level as well.

The *depth* of this experience is reflected for us in the gospel today. And the little stories told us today also highlight how experiences of lostness ripple and reverberate past the immediate context. One response to a lost sheep, a lost coin even, could be to shrug one's shoulder and say 'oh well. It will turn up', or just not bother, or say 'the wolves can have it'. But no. Here we see an *excessive* (perhaps an emotive) response to what is lost. A shepherd leaving 99 to fend for themselves, potentially at great risk and great cost to himself. A woman turning a house upside down. In the story of the prodigal son/the lost son (which as I explain in the pew sheet belongs to these two stories) the father waits looking, watching. These are not entirely rational responses! And what's more there is an excessive, non-rational response when the lost is found!

But all this goes to reveal something of the super-abundant, exuberant love that God has for his people. It shows the extent of his love, how far his mercy extends. It shows the extent of his grace, his 'amazing grace'. Some might say this excessive, exuberant love reveals God's 'crazy-love', which is correct. That 'crazy-love' is seen most perfectly in the Cross. God in Christ through his death and resurrection making a path for us to find our way to him. God in Christ finding us in our lostness.

Now, recovery from lostness can take two forms. And both find expression in the Gospels one way or another. One way to move out of the experience of lostness is to *return* to where we came from. In the Biblical record, this might be seen in language and stories about healing and restoration and renewal. We are called to leave the wrong path, the crooked way and *return* to the right way, the right path. We leave aside our stubborn inclinations and accept the direction God gives us. This is the language of repentance at the heart of the stories today. We are seeking, by God's grace, to *reorient* our lives *back* to God. This is not always easy. The first lesson today from Exodus highlights exactly what is at stake. Our idols have to be smashed. And smashed precisely because our golden calves *misdirect* us. They cause our disorientation.

But returning is not always possible. Israel cannot in fact return to Egypt. And grief does not allow such a return. In death something has definitively ended. That is why it is so hard. Why the change and necessary adjustment is so hard. We cannot go back. The son who returns to his father is *not* a return to the way things were. He has been away. The inheritance is squandered. He has to adjust to *a new way* of being a son. But whatever way out of lostness, it is not by our efforts or striving. We only find our way out and ahead by accepting God's love, his grace. His amazing grace. Amen.