

## **Sermon given by Revd. Canon John Hampton on 14/06/15**

I try to avoid watching drama series on T/V because once I have started I'm hooked and I have to watch the rest of the series to find out what happens. I can't promise that what I have to say this morning will be as enthralling, but it is the second part of a sermon that I began on the Sunday after Easter.

On that occasion I was talking about the Atonement, the At-one-ment as I referred to it –the process by which we are brought into a loving relationship with God. This involves the Incarnation and the Crucifixion – the life and death of Jesus. I suggested that by living our human life and dying an excruciatingly painful death he demonstrated how much God loves us and invites us to respond with our love for him. And to illustrate this I told the true story of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlander soldier who sacrificed his life for his comrades in a Japanese POW camp during the Second World War. But I believe there is more to it than that and to find out what it is we need to go back further into what I said then.

I said that I can't accept the doctrine of the Fall, the idea that humankind was created perfect but has gone wrong morally, an idea that the story of Adam and Eve seems to suggest. And the reason why I can't accept it is that it seems clear from palaeontology and anthropology that the human race, homo sapiens, has evolved over hundreds of thousands of years from

lower forms of life and in the process has inherited not only many of the physical characteristics but also many of the basic drives and instincts that animals have. In animals these instincts for survival, aggression, territory, reproduction for example, are essential and right, but in humans they are the cause of most, if not all, of the wrong-doing and suffering that we experience.

Let me illustrate this with the example of territory. Many animals need to secure a territory in order to make sure of enough food for themselves and their offspring and to defend it aggressively if necessary. Just watch male blackbirds in a garden if you want to see what I mean. Human beings are much the same, although in a much more sophisticated way. What is nationalism, which we have seen rearing its ugly head in recent decades, if it is not the instinct to secure and maintain territory?

In other words, what I am talking about is not a matter of something having gone wrong with human nature, but of the need for human nature to grow to become more like God, that is, doing away with selfishness and becoming loving towards God, his creation and our fellow human beings.

But this, of course, raises the question, “Why did God create us imperfect, selfish, liable, indeed certain, to cause suffering to one another and to ourselves?” I believe the answer to this

question has to do with the nature of love. We can only love because we can 'not love'. We need a choice in order to be able to love. Animals don't appear to have much, if any, choice in the way they behave - they cannot love in the way we can. God had to give us free will, an alternative to loving, the power to choose how to behave, in a selfish or unselfish way. Experience shows that this freedom is limited, however, by the instinctive drives that I've just been speaking about. St Paul expressed this in Romans 7.15-20, "What I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do". Isn't that your experience too? It is certainly mine. I usually know what I ought to do and sometimes I want to do it and do really try to do so, but in the event I realize often that I have failed.

If God had to create us in this way with a basic selfishness, in order for us to have an alternative way to behave and if it was certain that this would lead to sin and suffering, then in one sense God is responsible for the sin and suffering in the world. I believe that the life of Jesus and his death on the cross was God accepting responsibility for having to create us like this and sharing all that human life involves, including the failure, vulnerability and suffering. He bore the burden of the sin and suffering of the whole world and for a few moments at least it appears to have torn apart his sense of relationship with the Father. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Far from creating the world as it is and leaving it to get on with its

existence, God is directly concerned with and has shared what it means to be human.

So let's look a little closer at what this means for us. Left to ourselves we would behave just like other animals. At birth the instinct for survival enables us to feed, to feel pain, to cry for help if we are in distress and generally to be self-centred, without reference to the effect on those around us. If a baby is wet, cold, hungry, frightened, he or she will scream until someone does something to put it right – and the fact that it is two o'clock in the morning won't prevent the baby from doing so, or from repeating it at three o'clock.....and four..... and five o'clock if necessary! It is both right and essential that this should be so or else we might well not survive. If we continue to behave in this way though, screaming whenever anything upsets us, we become what we call a totally selfish person. Those around us modify this understanding of ourselves by correction and education, of course, so that most of us become tolerable to live with. Basically, however, we remain with this selfish attitude throughout life.

So what is the solution? Jesus said "You must be born again". Obviously no one can be born again physically. He was referring to spiritual rebirth – a new start in life with a different attitude. The Christian faith claims that it is possible to have a new nature and to be enabled by the power of the Holy Spirit to be set free from our animal drives or at least to control

them. We need a spiritual evolution to develop from the animal state to become like our Lord Jesus Christ, all in one lifetime – or perhaps within eternity!

This seems to me one of the things that today's Gospel reading is about; two short parables of the Kingdom of God, the rule of God in our hearts and minds. They say it is a gradual, growing process, whether we become Christians suddenly as St. Paul did or we are born, as most of us are, into a Christian environment and the Christian faith gradually becomes more real and significant to us as we grow older. God's ruling how we behave, doing what he wants, is something which needs to grow in us throughout our life. However old we are and however far we've come along the road of discipleship, there's always room for improvement!

I am going to finish by reading something from a children's book published in 1922, called 'The Velveteen Rabbit' by Margery Williams<sup>1</sup>, which, like Alice in Wonderland and Winnie-the-Pooh, has a deeper, subtler meaning in addition to the obvious surface one.

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<sup>1</sup> There appear to have been over 300 editions of this book since 1922

***"What is REAL?" asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender, before Nana came to tidy the room. "Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?"***

***"REAL isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become REAL."***

***"Does it hurt?" asked the Rabbit.***

***"Sometimes," said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. "When you are REAL you don't mind being hurt."***

***"Does it happen all at once, like being wound up," he asked, "or bit by bit?"***

***"It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be kept carefully."***

***"Generally, by the time you are REAL, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are REAL you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."***