

A sermon for Corpus Christi by Bishop Mercer CR preached at Letchworth

From the General Thanksgiving, which we know almost by heart: *Almighty God, Father of all mercies, we thine unworthy servants do give Thee most humble and hearty thanks . . . we bless Thee for the means of grace.*

The means of grace. They are of four sorts:

1. Things.

Archbishop William Temple of Canterbury described Christianity as *the most materialistic of the world's religions*. We rejoice that God who is Absolute Truth, Absolute Goodness, Absolute Beauty, Who is pure Spirit, Who is *without body, parts or passions* invented matter. Things are God's idea. Things originate with God. Beware a theology, a spirituality, a religious movement, that despises things, that restricts itself to the mind, to the spirit. Genesis tells us, *God saw everything that He had made, and behold it was very good* (Gen. 1.31). The angel of the Lord appeared unto Mary and said *That holy Thing which is to be born shall be called the Son of God* (Luke 1.35). God made not only angels but also men. St. Paul tells the Corinthians *God giveth it a body even as it pleased Him, and to every creature a body of its own* (1 Cor. 15.38).

God uses things as uncovenanted or charismatic means of grace. For example, Lawrence, an obscure French Carmelite lay brother, who spent his monastic life in the kitchen, became famous because of his book, *The Practise of the Presence of God*, now a much loved and well thumbed classic. He experienced God as much among pots and pans as he did at holy communion. He was converted from nominal church membership to a living faith by the sight of a bare tree in winter. He realized, *One day I shall be as dead as that tree*. Conversion by thing. We don't know if God has converted anybody else by means of a tree, or if in the future He will so convert anybody. That French tree may be a one off. Why God uses, or when God uses, any particular thing for a one off, only He can know.

Another example. The young theologian William Temple simply could not believe in the virginal conception of Jesus and in the physical resurrection of Jesus' body. He worried about these lines in the creed. One day he was at a piano recital. As he listened, he afterwards said, *I became convinced by God that Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary,*

that on the third day Jesus' body rose from the dead. Conversion by means of a piano. We don't know if God has converted anybody else by means of a musical instrument, or if in the future He will so convert anybody. That is why we describe such one off things as uncovenanted or as charismatic. They are unique, distinct, peculiar, particular.

2. Relationships.

Man is made in the image of God, and God is Trinity. The Father and the Son are so unified in love that the Holy Spirit is the outcome of their relationship. We humans cannot exist in isolation. Man and woman are bonded in love, and new people are the outcome of their relationship.

Now a human family is not an exact duplicate of the Holy Trinity, but the human family is one of the closest images of the Holy Trinity we can experience on earth. St. Paul writes to the Ephesians *I bow my knees unto the Father, from whom every family on earth is named* (Eph. 3.14-5). And human relationships can also give us an experience, not only of the unity of God, but also of the unity of Christ with his church. St. Paul writes to the Ephesians *Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the Church and died for it. A man cleaves to his wife and the two become one flesh. This mystery is great, but I speak of Christ and the church* (Eph. 3.25-33). The wedding service in *the Prayer Book* says of marriage *It signifies unto us the mystical union between Christ and His church.*

Sin enters into everything and partially spoils everything. Sin spoils all human relationships to a greater or lesser degree. Adam blamed Eve. Both were ashamed to be human. Cain killed his brother. There are some for whom the experience of family is misery. Some have had such bad fathers that they can not think of God as Father; or such bad mothers that they can not think of the mother of Jesus or of holy mother church. Some have had such bad husbands or such bad wives that they can not think of Jesus as Bridegroom or of church as bride.

But such misery is not wholly true for all. For most of us, the dearest people in our lives, the most beneficial people in our lives, are family. The soldier far away at war longs for one thing above all else, just to be with his wife and his children again. The young widow in New York is devastated because terrorists have taken

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away her husband, because her young children are deprived of a father. Human love is the means by which God gives us life itself, teaches us truth about Himself, gives us the affection, tenderness, support we need to go on living. And this is why matrimony is described as holy, why marriage is one of the seven sacraments. Human relationships, even friendships, are a means of grace.

3. The Book.

Or if you prefer it, the Books, for the Bible is a library. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit the books of the Old Covenant evolved, were written, edited, collected, saved, copied, printed, distributed, translated. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the books of the New Covenant ditto. St Paul tells the Corinthians *We have the mind of Christ* (1 Cor. 2,16). Yes, but only because we have the Bible. At her coronation, the Queen was presented with a copy of the Book. The accompanying words were: *This is the life and government of Christian princes. Here is wisdom, this is the royal law, these are the lively oracles of God.* At his ordination every deacon, priest, bishop is presented with a copy of the Scriptures.

The Bible is God's gift to the whole Christian church. Only then is it His gift to the individual Christian. We are not authorized to invent our own imaginative creations. As we pore over the Book we are to be mindful of what has always been believed by all men everywhere, we are to be aware of the saints scholars and martyrs who have gone before us, we are to be mindful of our own ignorance and limitations. We never exhaust the Bible. It is an ongoing part of a living relationship with God. As we hear it read in public worship, as we study it in company with others or on our own, as we meditate with it when at prayer, it can speak to us with freshness, it can convey messages from the Spirit which we need at that precise moment. It is full of surprises, pleasures. "Gosh. I had never noticed that before. Gosh, I didn't realize that."

The Bible is of course only a thing. Paper, printer's ink, glue, binding. But it is so much a means of grace to the catholic and apostolic church; for truth, for the tenderness and support of God's love which we need for daily living, that we call this thing the Word of God.

4. The Sacraments.

Things again, but covenanted means of grace. Sacraments mean something, but sacraments also do something. You never know effect what a bare tree may have on somebody, what result a piano recital may have on somebody. You never know what effect a Bible reading in church may have on somebody. Perhaps he has fallen asleep and can think nothing. Perhaps her head and her heart are so full of the sufferings of her grandchild that she can hear nothing. Not so the sacraments. These covenanted means of grace appointed for us by God the Trinity accomplish what they set out to achieve. No matter what you feel, think, or understand at your baptism, no matter how distracted you are, you are joined to the body of Christ, you become a part of Christ, *the child of God, an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven.* Even though you fall asleep at holy communion, even though you are so worried about your grandchild that you hear nothing, you receive the Body and Blood of your Saviour.

Solid things have an objective reality wholly independent of your thoughts and feelings. In the sacraments we have means of grace that operate at the level of objective reality. Water, bread, wine, oil, human hands. *Outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace.* Sacraments are unashamedly physical. They involve our bodies. Never are we less like angels than when we are washed at the font, when we eat and drink at the Lord's table.

At Corpus Christi, we think, quite properly, about our daily bread, about the fruits of the earth, not least about wheat and grapes. *We thine unworthy servants do give Thee most humble and hearty thanks . . . for our preservation, and all the blessings of this life.*

This year, by way of a change, I have suggested we might also think about the means of grace.

1. Uncovenanted things.
2. Human relationships.
3. The Book.
4. The seven sacraments.

Almighty God, Father of all mercies, we thine unworthy servants do give Thee most humble and hearty thanks for the means of grace.