

REALISING OUR UNITY WITH GOD

**Sermon preached at 10.00am Sung Eucharist,
St. Edmundsbury Cathedral
26 February 2017**

Before the presidential inauguration, the President-elect attended a service led by Rev Robert Jeffress, a Southern Baptist. TIME magazine printed his sermon in full. Read it and weep! ¹

Read it and weep not because it's about Trump and his cronies. Read it and weep because it's appalling religion. It's religion that, disturbingly, millions of people ascribe to, but that doesn't stop it being appalling religion. It's religion that makes God in our own image. Religion that uses God to justify our own agenda and prejudice.

God made humanity in God's image and humanity is forever returning the compliment.

This kind of religion is captured well in a comedy sketch I saw during half term. A woman is leading a dieting workshop. She is a fervent, Bible-believing Christian. She is all smiles and encouragement until she takes a dislike to a woman in the front row. The woman is from a minority ethnic group. The leader looks along the front of people and says to each other them "Jesus loves you, Jesus loves you" until she comes to the woman she is averse to. She pauses and says "Jesus likes you".

The problem for us more liberally inclined believers is that so many Christians ascribe to religion of that kind and just as it puts us off, it puts whole swathes of people off who are able to live their lives without believing in that way, people see the church as completely out of touch with their lives.

During half term I had a conversation with a gracious, thoughtful young man called Louis. Eventually, inevitably my work came up so we chatted a little about religion and faith. Louis said "I had religious education but I don't see the need to be religious. I see the value of faith, I feel spiritual when I am at high altitude in the mountains, but I don't believe in a God who is watching us all the time."

In a few words, Louis captured how many people in our society feel about religion – that is those who have thought about it at all. And Louis reminded me of the challenge we face in sharing the blessings of faith and a religious life. Let's think about Lent for a few minutes. Then I'll come back to Louis .

Lent begins in three days. In Lent our attention is drawn to our wayward ways. In Lent we are encouraged to focus on how foolish we have been in the past. Most of us are in fact aware of our foolishness throughout the year. We live with a sense of unworthiness and need to prove ourselves. We live with regrets and underlying guilt. We are sorry about the suffering our foolish ways have caused ourselves and others. ² Lent is the time in the church year when these things are highlighted.

Great care is needed. Some of us (I suspect most of us) are deeply split in our belief about God. We proclaim, we rely on, we are comforted by the belief that God is love, God is forgiving and merciful. Thanks be to God for that.

¹ <http://time.com/4641208/donald-trump-robert-jeffress-st-john-episcopal-inauguration/>

² Adapted from James Finlay, *Christian Meditation: Experiencing the Present of God*

At the same time we have a nagging sense that we are not good enough. Christian faith often leaves people with a background sense of guilt, of being a bad person. And much of the language we use in church can feed that negative self-image. "Lord I am not worthy to receive you..."

In Lent we come face to face with our image of God - conscious and unconscious. As Rowan Williams has said, often we operate as if we have to prove ourselves to God. When the prodigal son wakes up to his foolishness he resolves to go home and repentant. Like the prodigal heading home to beg for his father's forgiveness, often we labour under the illusion that our wayward ways make us unworthy in the eyes of God.³ It's part of the legacy of ancient religion that seeks to appease an angry, distant God with sacrifices – part of the ancient religion of Moses with a fiery God up a mountain – part of the legacy of the appalling notion that God requires a sacrifice to make up for our depravity.

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The truth couldn't be more different. We are never outside God's love and compassion. The idea that our weaknesses are obstacles to God's love is an invention of our egocentric view. Our egocentric view, with us at the centre of our lives, imagines that we are somehow separate to God. Transfiguration, transformation comes when we realise this dualism is based on ignorance and illusion. Joy and release come when one obstacle after another is removed and we realise that there is no divide, there is no separation, that all along in God we live and move and have our being. God is closer to us than we are to ourselves.

There is no place within us that is not encountered, embraced and made whole by God - encountered, embraced and made whole by a love that does not care to hear our litany of shortcomings and regrets. We are profoundly loved by God without any foundations for being loved, except divine love itself.

How does this help my half-term friend Louis?

It's tempting to think that in our narcissistic culture, most people live comfortably and are too caught up in material life to need religion. That analysis is too easy. Here in our ivory Cathedral it's easy to think that our narcissistic culture is opposed to the Christian way of self-discipline and self-sacrifice. If we settle for that analysis then all is lost. People in our modern, scientific society will never again be persuaded that God is up there watching our every move waiting to judge us when our lives end. This is good news because it helps us let go of that immature religion too. Our society may well have swung too far in favour of the individual. But rather than resisting the tide, we can recognise the wisdom in the trends around us. God's Spirit after all is not limited to the church.

The emphasis on the individual aligns with the deep wisdom in our tradition, the deep wisdom about the connection each of us has with God. In his own day, Jesus cut through the religiosity of the time and taught people about the immediacy of God. Notice how the Transfiguration, this morning's Gospel story, is not something out of ordinary. The Transfiguration reveals what is true all the time: the unity between Jesus and God, the unity between heaven and earth, our destiny to know our unity with the divine. In our own time we need to translate our treasures so that people recognise the presence of God in their lives.

The reality is that the path to realising our unity with God is the same for us religious types as it is for people who, like Louis, live without religion. It is the path of fewer words, less noise, less activity. It is the path to knowing that God is always present, it is only our attention that varies. It is the path inward in a world and in a church that is always stealing our attention and

³ Adapted from James Finlay, *Christian Meditation: Experiencing the Present of God*

distracting us with external entertainment and concerns. In Lent, all year round, we can proclaim "be still and know that I am God". Be still and know my presence with you. Be still and know.

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