

Staveley Parish Church
2009 Holy Week: Addresses after Mass

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I suspect all clergy have heard people say 'I'm not coming to church: you're all a bunch of hypocrites.' I usually respond: 'well, there's always room for one more, so you'd be in good company if you came.' We hear a lot about Judas in Holy Week, and Judas is, amongst other things, a hypocrite. Yesterday we heard him say that money used to buy oil should be given to the poor, whereas in fact he wanted to filch it for himself. And tomorrow there's an element of 'it wasn't me, guv, honest' in the Judas story. It puts me in mind of Homer Simpson's advice to Bart. Homer says:

*I want to share something with you: the three little sentences that will get you through life.
Number 1: Cover for me. Number 2: Oh, good idea, Boss! Number 3: It was like that when I got here.*

As it happens I think Homer is a great guy. For all his faults, he's a kind of innocent, and he certainly loves his family. But enough of these insights into my depraved televiewing habits. I want to talk tonight about demons—the kind of demons that assailed Judas, and because there's something of Judas in us all, about our human nature. Once again, biology will play its part.

We left Jesus on Sunday **standing at the gates of the city**, facing death in the city of wrong. Jesus faces his demons. As we go with him, we must face our demons, our fears. These demons are the enemies within, enemies of spiritual growth, enemies of resurrection. Jesus tells us to love our enemies, but we can't love these demons until we see them, and we can't see them until we look them full in the face.

What are our demons? Let's look at the demons in the Passion narratives. There are three obvious headings:

- Failure to confront reality, that is to say, *denials*
- Mob justice
- Evasion of responsibility

And of course Judas. I put it to you that Judas wasn't a particularly bad man, just weak. His weakness is part of the story, just as Peter's denials. Maybe if Judas hadn't killed himself he's be a saint like Peter. Anyway, let's look at those three.

- *Denials*. Peter's denials saved his skin—but only for that moment. Later, he wept, overcome with remorse. It's hard to hear today's news without being confronted by denials. How can a head of state deny his part in a situation that sees three quarters of his people starve while he lives in luxury? How can a politician say what is self-evidently not the case? Is anyone guilt-free? Who has not tried to get something for nothing, or used work time for personal business?
- *Mob justice*. There are so many stories that illustrate this. Children attacking other children in this week's news. One from 2007 sticks in my mind. In March of that year, The Times reported, a young man was surrounded by a gang with wooden sticks. Witnesses say that teenage girls egged on the attack with shouts of "Kill him, kill him."
- *Evasion of responsibility*. Judas said 'it wasn't me'. Pilate wriggled out of responsibility and washed his hands. Pilate needed to please his superiors. How often have I felt like that? Mr Brown's first comments about the economic downturn were that it was America's fault. It's easy to pick on politicians because they set themselves up for it, and few if any of them are as principled as Dennis Skinner. Look at bankers evading responsibility. Now, we all make mistakes. We all are greedy. We all want the advantages of investment dividends if we are lucky enough to have money invested, and our pensions depend on them. In this regard, we are all complicit in the problems that afflict us, and our children and grandchildren will have to bear the burden of the mistakes our generation has made. I accept all that, and I can't and don't condemn anyone for faults that also afflict me. However, the arrogance and lack of remorse that we see in public life at the moment is something beyond all this. According to the Gospels, Jesus was censorious about very little, but always, always, always about hypocrisy and complacency. Even Josef Fritzl seems to have acknowledged, eventually, the enormity of his actions after being confronted by his daughter's account of their effects on her and her children, holed up for 24 years in a damp and mouldy cellar. Even Fritzl.

Rant over. So three headings, but in truth they can be compressed into one: the sin of Adam—trying to be what we are not. The fig leaf has nothing to do with covering up our genitals, but is about covering up our naked selves by putting on a mask, a *persona* to hide our true faces. We deny the truth because of our need to save face, but it's not the face that suffers. It is the inner self that I harm when I deny what is evident to others. This inner self that is, in my theology, the Christ within, the Divine within. When we harm others, we wound the Christ within as surely as any nail on the cross.

I want to give you some biological basis for the Christ within. I begin with a prayer from the Liturgy of St Basil, addressed to Our Lady.

Because of you, O full of grace, all creation rejoices, the ranks of angels and the human race; hallowed temple and spiritual paradise, pride of virgins; From you God was incarnate and he, who is our God before the ages, became a little child. For he made your womb a throne and caused it to become wider than the heavens. Because of you, O full of grace, all creation rejoices; glory to you.

He made your womb a throne and caused it to become wider than the heavens. What a wonderful mage.

Mary is the means by which logos, word, wisdom becomes human. She is God-bearer, Θεοτοκος. Now, just listen to this reproductive biology.

- When an embryo is growing in the uterus, some of its cells invade maternal tissue. Some of these destroy maternal tissue and allow the embryo to exchange things with the mother.
- Some of these embryonic cells also find their way into mother's blood vessels and are carried throughout the mother's body.
- The invading embryonic cells are very unusual, in that they lose their individual boundaries and become a community without boundaries – individuals give way to a cooperative.
- Embryonic cells remain within the mother up to and after she gives birth, so the woman is changed by the embryo growing in her uterus. After giving birth, the woman is no longer the same: embryonic cells have been incorporated into her. The mother is changed by this, and it happens within a week of fertilization – before she knows she's pregnant.

All this is biological fact.

Now put this in theological terms. During pregnancy,

- Jesus' cells invade Mary.
- Mary does not reject Jesus.
- Jesus and Mary exchange material.
- Some of Jesus' cells are left behind in Mary after Jesus has been born, and by this means Mary has been changed, transformed by the 9-month Christ-pregnancy.

But Mary is the representative of humanity, she's one of us. So by spiritual extension, the Christ-event that began with Mary's pregnancy and transforms her, also transforms you and me.

Jesus' divine cells invade Mary. Jesus invades us – the divine spark within, like a divine radioactive core, ready to saturate all our cells, all our being, if only we will let it. As embryonic cells devour maternal tissue to enable exchange, so the divine core within can, if we allow it, devour our less salubrious parts, to enable exchange with God. Bishop Lancelot Andrewes in 1614 wrote: 'He was not idle all the time He was an embryo – all the nine months He was in the womb; but then and there He even eat out the core of corruption that cleft to our nature and us ... [We] were by this means made beloved in Him ... this the good by Christ an embryo.' This is astonishing for 1614, without knowledge of reproductive biology.

Exchange. The embryonic Christ and Mary exchange things through Jesus' placenta. So we exchange with God: God sustains us, and we offer the sacrificial gifts of worship and compassion. I call this *the doctrine of mystical intermingling*, and I have patented it!

Then there is community. Embryonic cells that invade the mother lose self-identity and become a community. This is a wonderful example of the mystical body of Christ where we lose our self-hood in community. In cooperation we can be so much more effective than we act singly. The light in a glow-worm comes from millions of luminescent bacteria – one alone is invisible, but when they act together it is a different story.

Given that we have this divine core within, why do we do rotten things like Peter, like Judas, like Pilate? Why, as Paul said, do we do what we know we shouldn't, and don't do what we know we should? Where do the demons come from? I look at newborn babies and see no evidence of them. But as Satan— however we choose to interpret that—entered into Judas, so Satan enters into us sometime during our exposure to life on this planet. There are spiritual battles going on in us all the time, and these are with the demons that we need to guard against.

Using my image of God implanted within, how do we allow this divine core to transform us?

- Mary listened. We need to listen to God. We do this by listening to God within, the still small voice. This is the implanted word.
- Mary did not resist. We must stop resisting the God within. Honest self-examination is a key to this. It's not so much that we have to do something actively, it's that we have to stop doing something, and the thing we need to stop doing is resisting.
- Thus we let the divine core within expand to fill our skins and suffuse all our tissues and thoughts. This is salvation, redemption, deification, theosis.

God became man so that man might become God, said St Irenaeus – orthodox theology known well enough by Cranmer in the Prayer of Humble Access.

Self-examination and prayer that can melt away the demons, allowing the divine spark within to fill our skins, and our wills to be aligned with God's. It is painful when the light of Christ shines in our souls and we see our sins starkly illuminated. But as Isaac the Syrian said, it is a spiritual gift from God for a man to perceive his sins. Only then can we repent. Isaac talks of three stages in the way of union: penitence, purification and perfection – that is to say, conversion of the will, liberation from the passions (detachment), and the acquisition of that perfect love which is the fullness of grace.

Mary is suffused with divine cells, she is divinized. She is a co-redemptrix. But remember, Mary is one of us, so we all share in this redemptive power if we choose to: we can all light the way for others. At our baptisms, each one of us becomes a Christ. As the Divine within suffuses all our tissues, so we have the new creation happening in and around our cells. We are transformed from one degree of glory to another.

*Finish then thy new creation
when we shall be
Changed from glory into Glory
Till in heaven we take our place*

Charles Wesley was thoroughly grounded in this theology. His most astonishing hymn is *Let earth and heaven combine*. Here are some lines from it:

*He deigns in flesh to appear,
Widest extremes to join;
To bring our vileness near,
And make us all divine:
And we the life of God shall know,
For God is manifest below.*

*His love shall then be fully showed,
And man shall all be lost in God.*

Mary enables this mystical intermingling of human and divine. It is based on sound theology and, amazingly, on sound biology. In the words of Mother Julian of Norwich, the Saviour 'began his work very humbly and very gently in the Virgin's womb.'

So where have I got to in this ramble? The point is that the battle for salvation is not about doing stuff and ticking boxes, but rather about relaxing so that the Divine core can expand to fill our skins, pushing out the demons. Imagine these demons as imps when you recognise one, and send it on its way. There's nothing like the light of day to make these creatures dissolve. But there is a never-ending supply of them, and they keep us in exile from that inner sanctuary.

Here is a poem that talks of this inner kingdom, the holy of holies within that I suggest needs to fill us from the inside. It was written by a 20-year old C H Sorley who died weeks later in 1915 at the Battle of Loos.

FROM morn to midnight, all day through,
I laugh and play as others do,
I sin and chatter, just the same
As others with a different name.

And all year long upon the stage,
I dance and tumble and do rage
So vehemently, I scarcely see
The inner and eternal me.

I have a temple I do not
Visit, a heart I have forgot,
A self that I have never met,
A secret shrine—and yet, and yet

This sanctuary of my soul
Unwitting I keep white and whole,
Unlatched and lit, if Thou should'st care
To enter or to tarry there.

With parted lips and outstretched hands
And listening ears Thy servant stands,
Call Thou early, call Thou late,
To Thy great service dedicate.

We left Jesus standing at the gates of the city and confronting reality. We are standing at the gates of the inner kingdom. Let us love our enemies, our demons. Let us embrace them and expose them to the light of Christ and watch them dissolve.

Lancelot Andrewes again:

I turn with groaning from my evil ways,
and I re-turn into my heart,
and with all my heart I turn to thee.

God of those who turn, and saviour of sinners,
evening after evening I will re-turn
in the innermost marrow of my soul.

From the depths my soul cries out:
I have sinned, Lord,
grievously sinned against thee.

I repent, oh I repent, spare me Lord,
I repent, oh I repent,
help me in my failure to repent.