

Sermon: Christmas 2005

(Isaiah 52 vv 7-10, Hebrews 1 vv 1-12, John 1 vv 1-14)

*He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. He came unto his own, and his own received him not.*

Is this the greatest tragedy of human history? We failed to recognise our God. How much suffering and pain in the world would be avoided if the human race were prepared to receive the Word of God? I am sure that this failure on our part to accept Jesus is the biggest mistake that we, as a race, have ever made.

That is a bold claim and you might wonder how I can justify it. All the wars, the natural disasters, extremes of poverty, appalling ignorance, epidemics of hideous diseases - surely these are the important problems which confront humanity and religion is a relative irrelevance, a sideshow concerned with the self-indulgence of personal spirituality and vague possibilities of an afterlife in the ethereal realm which might exist beyond the grave.

I can justify what I say, however. As a Christian priest, I can say that there is nothing irrelevant about eternity. Our true self, our soul, has the potential to live for ever. There is a judgment at the end of our life on earth. Our eternal destiny, our salvation, our hope of Heaven, if you like, will depend entirely on God. If we believe in Jesus and repent of our sins, when we die, we shall see Him as He is; we shall be made like Him and we shall enjoy an eternity of unmitigated bliss. If not? Well, what do you think?

That dependence on God is not merely for an afterlife, however, for what happens beyond the grave. We depend on God now. This is not a self-indulgent personal spirituality, but a realistic acceptance of the fact that everything we do in life, our very existence, depends on God. If we believe, we have eternal life here and now. We commune with God on earth as our Father and Friend, as Almighty God, merciful Judge, Saviour and Redeemer. We may know God now through faith and, if we know God, as Jesus says, we have eternal life.

That relationship with God on earth will determine everything else about us. What we decide about God makes all the difference to what we think about everything else. If we love God, we will not fight and quarrel and make war on other people. If we love God, we will share the good things that we have with the poor, care for the sick, work for famine relief, dedicate ourselves to causes like education and justice between nations and individuals. If we are right with God, we will not feel the need to consume the world's resources and to pollute the planet in a vain effort to find satisfaction in the abundance of our possessions.

So, I submit, the human race's failure to recognise God is in fact our biggest mistake. It is not just that we have lost our grip on the spiritual and ultimate reality. In fact, it is only by grasping the Eternal that we can make sense of the material, the present passing age. Get your religion wrong and your whole world falls apart in the flawed and destructive certainties of the fundamentalists or the rudderless drifting of contemporary secularism. It is frightening to see the perversion of liberal values by those who seek to impose by force of law their own version of freedom, while silencing the insights of whole cultures whose views are deemed to be unacceptable or politically incorrect.

It is a tragedy that the human race continues to deny God (or to worship false gods of its own invention) and it is in many ways an inexplicable tragedy. *He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. He came unto his own, and his own received him not.* We have to start with God. There is nowhere else you can start. God is Holy Trinity. He is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Jesus is the Son of God, God the Son, and therefore He exists in all eternity. Jesus is there at the Creation of the world. Our universe is His design. It belongs to Him. [I often say that we ought to keep God's commandments because, when we do so, we are obeying the Maker's instructions. Insofar as we love the Lord our God with all hearts, with all our soul, with all our mind and with all our strength, insofar as we love our neighbours as ourselves, we are living in harmony with the universe, we are going with the grain of creation. It is because we do not love God or other people as much as we ought to love them that everything goes wrong in the way that it does.] When Jesus was born in Bethlehem, He was born into the world that He had made and in many ways it is inexplicable that the world did not and does not accept Him.

There is more, however. Right back there in Genesis, it tells us not only that God made the world and everything in it; it also tells us that He made us human beings in His own image. We are special. He certainly made stars and planets and rocks and minerals. He made all the insects and flowers, trees, rivers and mountains. He made the birds and the animals. No doubt He also made spiritual beings like angels. But we are special. We are made in His image. And Jesus was born as one of us. He was a boy baby, born to a human mother, Mary, and He grew up to be a human man. Jesus is the archetypal human being. Jesus is both what we are and what we could be if we were to reach our full potential. We ought to recognise Him. When we look at Jesus, we are looking in a mirror, but this mirror reflects not the person you are, but the person you could be. Perhaps that is why we avert our gaze. If, however, we seek the vision of Jesus in this life, God promises that we shall be changed from glory into glory until we take our place in heaven. Then we shall no longer see as through a glass darkly because we shall see Him face to face and know as we are known.

Finally, in this section I must remind you that He came to His own people, the Jews. They, of all people, ought to have recognised Him. They ought to have followed Him. They ought to have laid down their lives for Him. They had the Bible, the Law, the Prophets and the holy writings. Yet they were the ones who crucified Him. What about us Christians? We have the Jewish Bible plus the four Gospels and the rest of the New Testament. We have the Church and the Sacraments. Are we Christians always worthy followers of Jesus? Do we even receive Him? Well may the old prayer petition God that *all who profess and call themselves Christians may be led into the way of truth, and hold the faith in unity of spirit, in the bond of peace, and in righteousness of life!* We need a lot of help if we are to be true Christians!

Given a full church at Christmas, preachers are often tempted to try to persuade people that they ought to come to church the rest of the year as well. This can be counterproductive. People do not like being nagged. One woman told me that she was so annoyed when one of my predecessors told his Midnight Mass congregation that they ought to come to church on Sundays that she had never been to St Michael's since. I'll risk it. Christian people should

meet together every Sunday, the day that Jesus rose from the dead, to break bread together in the Holy Communion, to hear His Word and to pray and praise together. There, I've said it. What an extraordinary thing for a priest to say, but can I justify it? Is it reasonable? Surely people can't be expected to come to church every Sunday in modern Britain. There are so many pressures. Our lives are so full. In an increasingly secular society, a lot of people are expected to work Sundays. Sunday is an opportunity to catch up on the shopping. A lot of leisure activities take place on Sunday mornings – presumably because the organisers think that people have nothing else important to do. If you want to take part, you just have to miss church. I've done it myself in order to run in the London Marathon. Moreover, in an increasingly secular society, family and friends expect you to be available for secular activities on Sundays. You feel abnormal if you refuse to take part in a family activity because it is Sunday and you insist on going to church.

I suppose my task is to persuade you that it is worth it, to persuade you that coming to church is more important than almost anything else you might do and that it is worth making a stand and being the odd one out if necessary. I wish I could give you a glimpse of heaven. If only, going home tonight could be like that first Christmas in the fields outside Bethlehem when the shepherds saw the angels and heard them sing. Surely, then we would believe. We would not only believe in a small way, a conventional way, we would offer our lives to Him. We wouldn't put Tesco before Holy Communion if we could truly see God. Yet we are told that we cannot see God and live. He is too wonderful for mortal minds to encompass. Perhaps it is safer to go to Tesco's than to come to church. We do try in the church to point people to heaven. That is why I preach. It is why we read the Bible. It is why we pray together. The choir singing are not only worshipping God themselves, they are trying to lift your heart and mine to the Lord as well. All those present in worship are companions on the pilgrimage to Heaven and we all ought to be helping one another on the journey to God. Of course, we're only human. My sermons fail. Our fellowship fails. We achieve only glimpses of the divine ourselves and often the holy vision is obscured by our failures. If you are looking for a perfect church to come to, you won't find it till you are dead and that might be too late!

God has, however, made Himself known. I doubt very much that you will tonight see the heavens opened and the LORD on His throne, high and lifted up. We do see Jesus, however. If you want to see what God is like, look at Jesus. In Church tonight, there is the Crib, reminder of that holy birth. There is the Cross, supreme symbol of the extent of God's love, to lay down His life for us. There is the altar, the place where we celebrate the Holy Communion, the assurance of His abiding presence with us and the pledge of our eternal home. God does indeed make Himself known to us if we will only open our eyes.

Does it matter, however, whether people come to church? Many people feel no need to worship at all. They feel no need to connect to the divine. Also many people feel they can worship perfectly satisfactorily on their own. I'm going to offer four reasons for taking part in public worship.

The first is God Himself. You can say you love your parents, but you never go to see them. Your time is taken up. Your life is very busy. You are sure they understand. They know

you love them without you having to prove it by sharing any time with them. Would you like it if your children treated you like that? Well, if we say we are in a loving relationship with God, it hardly rings true, if we can't find any time to spend with Him. We watch TV. We spend hours on the computer. We go to the gym. We keep our homes and gardens immaculate. We stay extra hours at the office. But when it comes to the person we say we love with all our hearts, it's *this year, next year, sometime, never*.

The second reason is you yourself. The Bible tells us not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together. Jesus promised to be present when two or three are gathered together in His Name. He commanded us to do this (to share in Holy Communion) in remembrance of Him. You certainly can have some very wonderful experiences of God when you are on your own. Some people meditate. Many find God in country walks and beautiful things. Others find God in service to other people. All these are real, but they are not enough. Christianity is a corporate thing. We need one another; we need word and sacrament. Christian faith is about growing in Christ, not a self-indulgent personal spirituality.

The third reason why you should come to church is because the Church needs you. The other night at our Parochial Church Council, we took the decision not to pay our bills, quite simply because we have not got the money. For the time being, we are looking to the Diocese to support us, but the Diocese is also in a parlous state financially and will not be able to do so indefinitely. It is a myth that the Church Commissioners are holding on to millions of pounds while leaving the parishes in the lurch. Commissioners' money is what previous generations gave and it is running out. The awful possibility is that there are no longer sufficient committed Christians in England to maintain a national Church. It is not just a question of money. There is so much of God's work to do and so few people to do it. If you believe that God really exists and that His Son is Jesus and that Jesus wants us to do the sort of things He talks about in the Gospels, you really cannot just leave it to somebody else. There are not enough somebody elses. This building won't be pulled down. English Heritage would see to that. But if there is not a sufficient worshipping congregation to sustain it, St Michael's could very easily be closed as a church and sold off for an arts centre or converted into flats or even maintained as an empty building at tax-payer's expense, but unused for the purpose for which it was built and cherished through the centuries. When Isaiah saw the LORD high and lifted up, the LORD asked, *Who will go for us?* Isaiah replied, *Here am I; send me*. What do you say to God today?

Finally, you should go to church for the sake of the world outside the church. If the world's greatest problem is that it does not recognise its God, what the world needs is for faithful people like you and me to stand up for what we believe. It isn't good for the world if churches close for lack of support. It isn't good for the world if there is only a feeble Christian presence in public life. It isn't good for the world if we don't share our faith and bear witness to Christ. It looks as if, in the immediate future, committed Christians will be a minority. It may be that we will be a small Church. It may be that we have to worship, bear witness and serve in an indifferent or hostile world in which our services and ceremonies are squeezed out of mainstream public life and our values are denigrated. If so, we'll be more like the early Church, a persecuted minority, but one which turned the world upside down!