

Sermon by Bishop Richard Harries

First Sunday in Lent – 18th February 2024

St Mary's, Barnes.

As you drive from Chalkers Corner to Kew you cannot avoid seeing thousands of graves laid out to your left in North Sheen Cemetery whilst to your right are an equal number in Mortlake Cemetery. So many who once lived now dead in the ground. As the Ash Wednesday words said, 'Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.' Sometimes on those graves will be inscribed words like 'Never forgotten' or 'In our hearts for ever'. But if you look at some of the memorials in our own churchyard all the words have now been erased by the wind and rain. They are forgotten; no hearts remain to remember them.

I begin like this not to make us depressed but to take us back to the essentials of our faith. Quite simply we are here on earth for a short spell in order to grow, to grow spiritually, as some might say. But from a Christian point of view it is more precise than that. We are here to grow in the knowledge and love of God. And because God has opened his heart to us in Christ we can phrase this in other ways as well. We can say that it is to grow in the likeness of Christ. So though we are indeed reduced to nothing, and there will be a time when no one remembers us on earth, that is not the whole truth about us. The more important truth has to do with how far we have grown in the knowledge and love of God. How far we have allowed Christ to dwell in us. How much we now reflect the likeness of Christ. For what remains when all else falls away is our relationship to God. As Jesus said, he is the God of the living, of those who continue to live in and through their relationship with him.

That is the first fact to bear in mind in Lent. The other is even more fundamental. The one whom we are called to know and love is good, all good, our true and everlasting good. God desires our well being far more ardently than we ourselves do. As human beings we all tend to look after ourselves and that is natural-but God wants the best for us

much more than we do for ourselves. For he is good, all good, our true and everlasting good. Lent is, quite simply, a time to draw more fully on that goodness, to let it permeate our lives, and shape our outlook. Lent is not a time for self-punishment, not a time of forcing oneself to feel bad about oneself. It is of course a time when we can come to a greater knowledge of ourselves, a time to be more aware of the evasions and deceits of our lives. But above all it is a time to be more aware of that goodness, more awake and alert to it, a goodness that meets us every moment of every day. Most obviously we meet it in the colour and growth of this lovely spring with the crocuses, daffodils snowdrops, camelias flowering. We meet it in the smiles and kindness of the people about us. We meet it in the daily challenges that face us, and in the promptings of the Spirit to respond to some need. We meet it in the opportunity to worship together and in the grace of the sacrament. Lent is a time in which to deepen our gratitude for the goodness that holds us in being, that meets us in every moment and which helps us to grow.

The first reading today was the climax of the story of Noah's ark. The story of a great flood is shared with a number of ancient near eastern texts but how it is treated in the Bible is very different. It is there as a parable. From our human point of view we might be tempted to say that humans have made such a mess of the world it would be best to scrap the lot and start again-but God does not say that. Despite everything life remains a blessing and he will continue to sustain our life in existence, and of this the rainbow is a sign. Despite the fact that so much has gone wrong, there is still a primal goodness at the heart of life to draw upon.

Today's Gospel was from Mark, the first and shortest of the four. He does not include the details of the three temptations which will be familiar to you from other years. But what we had read was first the story of the Baptism in which Jesus heard the words 'You are my beloved Son in whom I take delight'. Although Jesus had to walk a very testing way, one which in the end aroused opposition, those words will have rung in his ears and warmed his heart at all times. He

knew in his bones he was someone in whom delight was taken. Then in the desert as Jesus was tempted Mark records that the angels tended to his needs. However testing or difficult life might be God is with us and his grace touches us where it is needed.

T. S. Eliot ends his poem East Coker, the second part of the Four Quartets with the words

Old men ought to be explorers
Here or there does not matter
We must be still and still moving
Into another intensity
For a further union, a deeper communion.

Eliot himself had a very difficult life and nor surprisingly the verse continues

Through the dark cold and empty desolation,
The wave cry, the wind cry, the vast waters
Of the petrel and the porpoise. In my end is by beginning.

Our end is our beginning in a double sense. The end of physical life, death, is the beginning of a new life in God. But in a more important sense whether in this life or another our true end, our goal, or telos, is God,. He is that towards which our life is pointed and in which it finds its fulfilment. That life in God is always the beginning of our true life.

But whether life is easy or difficult it remains true that there is blessing to be found and drawn on, goodness to be recognised and lived in, for the one who sustains us in being and helps us grow into the likeness of Christ is good, all good our true and everlasting good.

That is why

We must be still and still moving
Into another intensity

For a further union, a deeper communion .

So to the one in whom there is blessed and eternal communion,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be all glory now and evermore.