

Seven Deadly Sins

Michaelmas 2018

7th October 2018, Rev Dr Simon Perry, Lust

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11th November 2018, Professor Morna Hooker, Remembrance Day (Wrath)

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Rev Dr Simon Perry

Lust

7th October 2018

Mt 5: 27-37

Jer. 31:31-34

Seven Deadly Sins – yes, that’s the topic for this term. Welcome to Cambridge! In fact, there may well be some for whom the seven deadly sins read like a moral bucket list: lust, pride, gluttony, greed, anger, envy and sloth. Nothing about deceit, nothing about violence, nothing about devil worship, or plagiarism, or dangerous driving. It’s quite a list, which has its origins, like many Churchly Beliefs, not in Scripture but in the Fourth Century.

In fact, the list found its way into Christianity from the older pagan ethical convictions that there are such things as vices (on the one hand) and virtues (on the other). So that some activities are very, very good, and other activities are very, very naughty. Imported into Christianity, this is a mentality that prevails with the belief that some Christian activities like prayer, worship and bible study are good and virtuous, whereas drinking, smoking and swearing are inherently evil practices. But we all know, of course, that not every prayer is free of ludicrously self-centred appeal to a supernatural deity; not every act of worship is free of the self-deluded capacity to project our own image into the heavens and call it ‘God’, and not every Bible Study is free of subconsciously twisting the text into an infallible defence of my own unwittingly pagan opinions. All that to say that the line between good and evil runs straight through the middle of every vice and every virtue. This is particularly true for our first topic this term – the topic that leaves every clergyman scrambling for the back of the queue: lust. Presumably, fear of hypocrisy leaves clerics shuffling awkwardly towards another topic. But more about hypocrisy in a few minutes.

I suppose Lust today is generally revealed by a glance at someone’s hard drive, and generally understood as something called, ‘the male gaze’. Although – I’m not really sure where the current moral consensus lies on whether there can be an exclusively single-gender vice. If you don’t mind, as a cowardly privileged white middle-aged, middle-class male from middle England – that is a minefield I will simply tip toe around.

However it’s interpreted – Lust is universally understood as a precursor, and a necessary precursor, to the kind of amorous activities that result in the propagation of the species. (There’s no beating around the bush here!) Mutually consensual sex presumably involves some form of mutual attraction, which at some point involves a degree of what most people take to be lust.

Now – who was it that once said, “Go forth and multiply?” Oh that’s right – it was God. There is a legitimate place for being physically attracted to another person. In fact, I can’t help thinking about Ned Flanders in this respect [Not like that] – who anxiously confessed to Reverend Lovejoy, “I think I might be lusting after my own wife.” In the 1990s, that was an hilarious joke – but clearly times have changed, as you have all just demonstrated. But the line between good and evil runs straight through the deadly sin of Lust.

The condemnation of lust in the New Testament is found primarily in the reading we had from Matthew’s Gospel. But to get to grips with what Jesus says there – it is important to hold in mind the Old Testament reading from Jeremiah. Several centuries before Christ, the nation of Israel had been defeated by the empire of Babylon. And

Jeremiah was the prophet who had foreseen these events unfolding, attributing Israel's defeat to its refusal to take God's covenant to heart. But – in the section of his prophecy we heard this evening – he promised that a day would come when that covenant would be written into the hearts of the people. No longer would this covenant be a document, external to who I really am – but something that seizes me at the core of my being. “I will put my law within them. I will write it on their hearts.”

That, it seems, is the ethical basis for much of what Jesus has to say. This is not Kantian, deontological ethics, where there is a timeless moral maxim to which I try to measure up. The New Testament word for that pattern of ethics is hypocrisy: trying to live by a script that is external to who you are as a person. No – the pattern of ethics we see in the Gospels is one in which you hear the Word at the core of your being, and you allow it to do its work on you. That is all. And then that spoken word takes root in your being manifests itself in the ‘fruits’ of your actions. Encounter God at the core of your ethos, and you don't need a moral blueprint for living.

So, when Jesus speaks about adultery, he addresses it within the context of the marriage covenant, and what it means to keep that covenant at the depths of your being. So: Jesus is addressing not merely looking at someone with lustful intent – but more specifically the word means to keep your passion burning. In fact, originally it meant to keep your anger burning – but if I trespass into the sin of anger I will face the Wrath of Professor Hooker who will tackle that subject on November 11th. No – Jesus is condemning not simply a lustful thought, but the deliberate, sustained, consideration of adultery. And it's that deliberate, sustained consideration that takes root at the core of your being – at the roots of who you are – where it really should be the covenant that has taken root.

If your religion is an external code of moral maxims, then you might say – I haven't actually committed adultery – you can celebrate the Me Too movement with impunity. The Jesus of Scripture, on the other hand, is looking at the core of your being, because he recognizes that – as Solzhenitzin famously claimed – the line between good and evil runs straight through every human heart. You don't get to look down on others who have committed publicly verifiable crimes.

This is not Jesus warning everyone that if you so much commit a thought crime or fail to obey an impossibly high standard, then you're in the devil's grip and destined for an eternity of torment, red-hot pokers and Love Island on repeat. No – Jesus has his guns turned on a well-established and seemingly immovable moral hierarchy of those who can follow their external scripts and those who do not. He is simply revealing how easily we can be unwittingly guilty of the very crimes we like to condemn in others. So... those who hear this Jesus well, hear him say that:

You don't get to feel smug about someone else being publicly shamed because their genitals got them into trouble.

You don't get to shout ‘shame, shame’, either at Circe Lannister or at U.S. Senators.

You don't get to draw the line between good and evil, because the very act of drawing that line is likely to leave you on the wrong side of it.

“I will put my law within them. I will write it on their hearts.”

Rev Dr Simon Perry

Pride

14th October 2018

Luke 18: 9-14

It's something you're supposed to take. It's something you're supposed to swallow. And it's something that comes before a fall.

Yes, this week we are looking at the most deadly perversion of the human faculties: pride. If it's that deadly, I suppose we ought to know what pride actually is – because from what I can gather it seems to mean virtually everything and then its opposite. Here are some straightforward definitions:

'A legitimate sense of achievement' / 'An over-inflated sense of self-importance'; 'A positive self evaluation.' / 'A false front designed to protect an undervalued self.'; 'The opposite of shame' / 'The opposite of humility.'

As with other 'deadly sins', the line between good and evil runs straight through the middle of pride. Of course, because the list of Seven Deadly Sins sounds like a religious list – it is assumed that it is found in Christian Scripture – which it most definitely is not. But the bible does condemn one aspect of pride – repeatedly, throughout Jewish and Christian texts.

It concerns our capacity to draw the line between good and evil, as a line between us and them. Today's Gospel reading offers an obvious example of what now looks like a ridiculous story, because we no longer live in an honour /shame culture. Jesus paints the picture of a Pharisee who goes up to the Temple, thanks God for his own honour-status, and then thanks God that he's not like the knuckle-scraping grunt-monkey of a tax-collector wallowing in the cesspit of his own self-inflicted shame. But the virtuous tax-collector hangs his head in shame, seeks God's mercy and goes home forgiven – unlike the pompous Pharisee.

So – with nauseating predictability, we mentally shake our head at the Pharisee, and presume that Jesus was stating the excruciatingly obvious. We all know that Pharisees were pompous, self-righteous purveyors of religious OCD. And we all know that tax collectors were just doing their job, facing a high degree of social pressure with low self-esteem. And so, bizarrely, most modern interpreters read or hear this text and think, 'Thank God I am not like this Pharisee; for don't judge anyone because you see I am open and tolerant and not a religious fruitcake.' Which, of course, means we've fallen straight into the trap of this parable.

The real-life Tax Collectors of Judea, were collaborators: complicit in the ravages of Roman occupation: Jews regarded them as prostitutes, Rabbis called them robbers, and the Romans themselves compared them to brothel-keepers. At every level of the Roman tax-farming system, tax collectors had to bid for the privilege of collecting taxes. And it wasn't as though there were a recognized legal or limited cut these functionaries took: they took everything they could from those who could not afford to give it. Defaulting on payments, families that had farmed their own land for generations saw it taxed away from beneath their feet, and they were forced to become rent-paying tenants of land that was formerly theirs.

It was an understatement to say that people were not happy with tax collectors. And the methods of extraction were brutal: Philo, the first century Jewish writer, recorded an incident in his native Alexandria:

“Recently a certain collector of taxes was appointed in our area. When some of the men who apparently were in arrears because of poverty fled in fear of unbearable punishment, he laid violent hands on their wives, children, parents, and other relatives, beating and trampling and visiting every outrage upon them to get them either to betray their fugitive or to pay up on his behalf. But they could do neither, the first because they did not know, the second because they were no less poverty-stricken than the fugitive. But the collector would not let them go before he racked their bodies with twistings and tortures or killed them off with newly contrived modes of death.”

Tax collectors were not all sweet and innocent. Pharisees, on the other hand, were not viewed as holier than thou religious morons. They had no political authority – and often not much in the way of wealth. Many of them were champions of the people, who opposed the ravages of the Roman occupation, and wanted to see an end to the oppression of their people. They were seen by many as heroes, people to whom we should look up, people who genuinely cared ‘for the many, not the few!’ Today, you might compare a Pharisee to a leader of Momentum, [of which the Chaplain is a member] and the tax collector to an over-wealthy tax-dodging lobbyist.

No. Everyone knew with self-righteous assuredness that tax collectors are evil and Pharisees are good. And Jesus says, no. Forget good and evil. All that counts is how you respond when you’re confronted with the ground-shaking otherness of Yahweh. If you know you’re in the right, that God is always your ally, and any divinity in its right mind would be sure to give you a jolly good pat on the back – that, is what Scripture means by Pride.

But of course, in an age that feels increasingly judgemental – it’s a message that reaches far beyond the doors of the church. Pride – as it’s portrayed in the Gospels – is an insidious trait, of which others are guilty and to which we are immune.

The era of identity-politics makes it increasingly dangerous to adopt the wrong brand of feminism, the wrong form of anti-racism, the wrong type of political correctness.

And when we demonise those whose views are not our views, it doesn’t matter how irreligious we might feel, we are stood right next to that pompous Pharisee in the Temple.

The era of social media requires not only that we are permanently, blissfully, and tediously happy, also requires a level of perfection. A level of perfection that demands we engage in virtue-signaling by separating our morally superior ‘us’ from a Trump-supporting Brexit-voting ‘them’.

And it doesn’t matter how atheist we might claim to be, we are stood right next to the pompous Pharisee in the Temple.

The era of secularism demands that we look down on the Pharisee, that grinaholic religious fruitcake with the self-awareness of a boiled egg.

And when we demonise the Pharisee in the story, without taking the trouble to learn what a Pharisee was, we have actually become that pompous Pharisee.

Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

Intercession

Lord, we worship you as the God of Glory who humbled himself to death on a cross. And through that humility, we worship you as the exalted one.

Forgive us our pride, our avoidance of practical humility, and our assumption that the causes that matter to us are the only causes that matter.

Give us the discernment to see when causes that matter to us, are trivial distractions from causes that really matter.

Give us the courage to allow others to confront us with our own prejudices and unmask the blind spots in our worldview.

Give us the readiness to hear your voice through the voice of those with whom we disagree

Give us the grace to listen in such a way as to have our mind's changed.

Give us your Spirit, that our actions here and now may reflect something of who you are.

And so by your Spirit and through those who hear you,

May your word bring peace, with all of its glorious disruptions.

May your word bring comfort, and encouragement to those who need it.

May your word speak to truth to power, and give a voice to those who go unheard.

Make it true for our world, that all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves be exalted.

Professor Morna Hooker 11th November 2018

Wrath

Remembrance Day 2018

If you were to ask anyone born and brought up in this country to name the most important date in English history, they would surely answer '1066'. Our history has, after all, been summed up as '1066 and all that'. But of equal if not greater significance is the year 1918, another date which is seared into our nation's memory, and whose events are recalled not simply by the year, but by the month, the day, and the hour: the armistice came into effect at 11 a.m. on the 11th day of the 11th month.

The fact that we have gathered today to commemorate that cease-fire is extraordinary, for in many ways the treaty that was drawn up at the end of the First World War was a dismal failure. The punitive measures laid down by the Allies led to festering resentment, and a mere 21 years later, Europe found itself at war again. The 'war to end wars' proved to be nothing of the sort. And though open warfare between the major European countries did cease in 1945 – and one or two of us here tonight actually remember the joyous celebrations of VE night – I do not think there has been a single day since when there has not been war somewhere in the world – war in which one or other of the European countries have, directly or indirectly, been involved.

Some years ago, one might have thought that by 2018, the events of a hundred years ago would have been forgotten, but surprisingly, 11th November seems today to be more important than ever. Why? And – more importantly – should it be? Should we be remembering? Our answer must surely be a resounding 'Yes', since it is only by remembering what happened that we can hope eventually to bring about the promise of 'Never again'. As has often been said, the nation that forgets its past is in danger of making the same mistakes in the future.[1]

So what were those mistakes? Whenever I have tried to understand the events that led up to the outbreak of the Great War, I have always found myself puzzled. It all seems so absurd – in many ways, trivial – so easily avoidable. But if you want a theological explanation, things become more explicable. If national leaders decided to fight, it was the result of some of the so-called 'Deadly' sins that we are considering this term: lust for power; excessive patriotic pride; envy of others; greed for land. It was these that led to the wrath – the uncontrollable anger – which caused men to fight one another to the death. And it was these same sins (in which to a large extent both sides shared) that led to the revenge of the Allies, demonstrated in the conditions of the peace-treaty. The lesson which all failed to learn was a very simple one: the need to consider the other person, for basically, all these sins are manifestations of selfishness. And if you think only about yourself, or about your own nation – and your slogan is 'Me First' or 'Us First' – and forget about others, then you are heading for disaster. There are alarming echoes, which I do not need to spell out, in some of the slogans we hear constantly today from political leaders, and in the attitudes that infect our society.

We gather today, then, to remember. To remember, first of all, the sacrifice of those who died, and the suffering of those who were bereaved and injured. And that means remembering the fallen and the bereaved on both sides of the conflict. We may – or we may not – feel that we know enough to apportion blame to the leaders who led their nations into war and who took the vital decisions which led to loss and to victory, but young men and women on both sides fought and died in what they believed to be a just cause. And families on both sides were bereaved as a result.

I well remember the first time I stood in a German cemetery and saw a row of graves all bearing the same date. They had been put up in memory of villagers killed in one night by an air-raid – and I realized with a shock that it was our bombers that had killed these innocent citizens. And on both sides of the channel you will find memorials put up ‘to the glory of God’ and listing those who fought and died. When both sides claim that God is on their side, we can only wonder whether he is on either side. We can certainly honour these men’s courage and sacrifice, and commit them to God’s mercy, but let us not imagine that God is in any way glorified by our hatred, our bitterness, our wrath.

At the end of the Falklands War, a Thanksgiving Service was held in St Paul’s Cathedral. To the fury of certain politicians, those who planned the service insisted that it was not a service of triumph, but of remembrance and reconciliation, and that the prayers should include the wounded, dead and bereaved on both sides. They were surely right to do so. Whatever the rights and the wrongs of that conflict, the maimed and the sorrowing were all in need of the comfort of God. Today, many of the ceremonies taking place to mark the centenary of November 11th 1918 have brought together representatives from former enemies, united in compassion for those who suffered as a result of war, determined that it must not happen again.

But of course there are rights and wrongs in any conflict. Those few of us who remember the Second World War can only say ‘Thank God’ that we did stand up to Nazi aggression, and that Hitler was stopped before he had completely wiped out all the Jews in Europe and imposed his power on every country.

So while we remember with compassion, we remember also with thanksgiving – thanksgiving that through the sacrifice of those who died we were saved from enemy occupation and from all that that would have meant. Though if we are wise we will acknowledge that in the conduct of war both sides made mistakes that brought unnecessary suffering to innocent people. Our prayers of thanks-giving must be balanced by prayers for forgiveness.

We remember, then, with compassion, thanksgiving, and penitence.

But I have a problem, because these are all positive qualities, and I have been commissioned to speak tonight about wrath, which is the last thing we want to encourage today. So what exactly is wrath? According to one definition, it is ‘extreme anger’. Does that mean that it’s anger that is being misused?

Already this term we have seen how the seven ‘sins’ are in effect the misuse of something good. Lust is a perversion of desire; pride is a distortion of self-respect; envy grows out of honest admiration. But wrath is alone among them in being attributed in the Bible to God! So why is it regarded as a sin?

It would seem that we are talking about anger that has got out of hand, and is being misdirected. The extreme anger, the wrath, the desire for revenge, which is so often unleashed in wars, and which directs many terrorists, is certainly evil. But anger directed against what is evil can be a force for good.

You may have been surprised that for our New Testament reading today

I did not choose a passage about war or peace or wrath or reconciliation, but the story of one of Jesus’ healings (Mark 1:40-45). In that story we heard how a leper, contrary to Jewish laws about avoiding all contact with society, approached Jesus and asked to be cleansed of his leprosy. Jesus, Mark tells us, was ‘moved with anger’, and

deliberately touched him; by all the rules, he should thereby himself have been made a leper, but Jesus' power was such that he healed the leper.

But why was Jesus angry? Some manuscripts ascribe his actions to compassion, rather than to anger, perhaps because a scribe, offended by the idea that Jesus could experience anger, deliberately changed the text – and many translators follow suit, for similar reasons. And of course in a sense they are right, for Jesus was 'moved by compassion'. But that very compassion led to anger – anger that the man was suffering from this terrible disease, and that it had caused his exclusion from society, so that he endured a living death. In the first century, Jesus' anger would have been interpreted as anger with Satan, who was seen as the cause of disease. It was Jesus' anger that led him to act: to heal the man and restore him to society.

There is a very thin line between anger and wrath. But the wrath unleashed in 1914, as we have seen, was rooted in the sins of lust, pride, envy and greed, while the anger of Jesus was rooted in compassion – the very opposite of selfishness. The one is destructive, the other constructive, the one inflicts hurt, the other heals.

So perhaps in our modern world, where wrath is still being unleashed on innocent victims, we need a little more anger – not the kind of anger fuelling the political debates dominating the news, but anger directed against the injustices of our world, where the rich exploit the poor, and where the strong put down the weak; anger which is prepared to take on the bullies who care only for their own welfare, and care nothing for the suffering of others; anger which protests, not against our own perceived injustices, but against the very real injustices suffered by others. Our anger needs to be directed against these problems, for if they are allowed to fester, then they will feed bitterness and hatred, and the world will once again be engulfed by the wrath of men and women thirsting for revenge.

How do we best remember the events of a hundred years ago? How do we make that rash promise of 'Never again' a reality? It is by dealing with the causes of war: directing our anger against the injustice suffered by others, and against ignorance and misunderstanding, is the best method of averting the wrath of revenge.

[1] The saying is found in various forms, but has been traced back to the Spanish philosopher Santayana, who wrote that 'Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it'.

Rev Dr Simon Perry

Gluttony and Greed

18th November 2018

Our college is very generous with its food, and it is possible to identify which of the fellows avails themselves of this generosity more than any other. The college glutton if you like. The Finance Bursar has suggested that the winner of this year's college gluttony award should be the one to give the sermon this evening – and as it turns out, he is.

According to medieval theologians, there are important differences between gluttony and greed – but they do seem quite unconvincing (and the reason I find them unconvincing is not only this term has an insufficient number of services to treat them separately). It is rather that invariably, gluttony is a subcategory of greed – the part of greed that is food related. So this evening, we'll be rolling gluttony and greed into one single, stodgy, satisfying and apparently, deadly sin.

It's worth noting though – that sitting at the dinner table and stuffing your face like a remedial chimpanzee before swigging everything down with enough fine wine to slur the speech of a T-rex – this is not technically a sin. When you read the Gospels, Jesus and his disciples seem to spend most of their time eating their way around Lower Galilee, from one dinner table to another. To the point where Jesus himself was accused of being a glutton and a drunkard. As with most of the seven deadly sins, so with gluttony – the sin we picture doesn't appear to be that deadly at all.

In a context of poverty and scarcity, one of the great images of the coming of God's Kingdom is that of a great feast – and Jesus spent a lot of time at feasts!

The context of scarcity in the OT reading is equally illuminating. The story from exodus concerns the provision of manna... Israel have escaped from Egypt and into the desert, and for their daily sustenance, they are utterly dependent upon the miraculous provision of their deity. And sure enough – their deity provides a curious kind of 'bread from heaven' that satisfies well enough for the day, but the moment you try to hoard it, it fills with maggots. The idea is that Israel were learning to be radically and perpetually dependent upon their God, and greed was bad because it served as a substitute for that dependence.

Those who tried to hoard the bread, were probably the first in history to attempt to have their cake and eat it – i.e., to hoard it for themselves and at the same time to benefit from the daily provision. Having your cake and eating it, the philosophy otherwise known as cake-ism, brings us closer to the sin of greed.

I can't help thinking of Boris Johnson's policy on cake – that he was pro having it, and pro eating it too. And so was born the Brexit philosophy of cake-ism, a philosophy applied to multiple dimensions of proposed arrangements in the apocalyptic post-brexit universe. This led Donald Tusk, in October 2016, to propose an experiment: he called upon the proponents of 'cake-ism', to buy a cake, eat it, and see if it is still there on the plate.

A fine example of cake-ism from the New Testament is heard in the Gospel reading this evening. The chap who, after a bumper harvest in a region in desperate need, used his profits to build bigger barns, put his feet up and rest in peace. He literally had his cake in the barn, at the same time as eating, drinking and being merry. Now – it might

appear simply that this wealthy fellow had so much cake, there was enough to have it and eat it. But that's not the point of the story. No – the real issue here, was this chap's attitude toward God. His belief that on the one hand, you can use your wealth to dislocate yourself from the real needs of real people in the real world – and on the other, he can be a morally upstanding worshipper of Yahweh. That, is having your cake and eating it. Being radically self-centred on the one hand – and being God-centredly pious on the other.

In fact, being wealthy in First Century Palestine meant that you could be comfortable when most could not, and that must be because God had chosen to bless you. Wealth was so much seen as a sign of God's blessing that when Jesus pitched up, he utterly astonished everyone. Now, according to the Gospels Jesus was astonishing people all the time – he would still a storm, drive out demons, raise the dead – and these things all astonished people. But on only one occasion were people exceedingly astonished: and what was it that had exceedingly astonished them? His simple declaration that a rich man getting into the Kingdom of God is harder than a camel getting through the eye of a needle. This, it seems, is not because wealth in itself was a deadly sin. But because sometimes wealth fosters greed, and greed dislocates you from those you consider beneath you, and if the Jesus of Scripture is to be found anywhere in this world – it is among those you consider beneath you.

At Berkley, multiple studies have been conducted upon what one of their researchers calls, 'the science of greed'. With remarkable regularity, they found that once greed has sunk its roots into your psyche, you are more likely to care less for others. There are multiple examples from the Monopoly Board to the School playground.

But the simplest is perhaps, at what we call a Zebra Crossing. When you're driving, and you see people waiting to cross the road at a crossing, the law in the UK, as in Californian State law, is that the driver has to stop for the pedestrian. Now the researchers sorted cars into five price categories, from the most expensive to the least expensive. Now each of the least expensive cars – to date, without exception – complied with the law and stopped for pedestrians. And again, without exception, every single car in the most expensive category ignored pedestrians, broke the law, and drove straight over the crossing.

It's a silly example, and there are many others, but researchers also found that these behaviours could be easily reversed. Than when people who ticked all the boxes of greediness behaviour, were forcibly confronted with situations of real human need, their behaviour changed. Even in small, seemingly unimportant ways. The conclusion was that being reconnected with humanity, diminishes the power of greed.

As we've covered the deadly sins this term, it is worth remembering that one Theologian simply regarded sin as 'man turned in on himself', dislocated from others and from God. An idiot, in Greek terms, unconcerned with the world out there because of preoccupation with himself, or his wellbeing, or his identity. If gluttony and greed are sins, it is only to the extent that they dislocate us from others and from God. And ironically, it is precisely with the use of food and drink that Moses and Jesus seek to reconnect their followers with others and with God!

That's why I'm delighted that one thing we do extremely well at Robinson, is eat.

Greed and Gluttony Intercession

Lord God

We worship you as the God of power and generosity, who entered human existence as a vulnerable peasant.

We pray for those forced to flee their homes because of poverty, exploitation or war. For those who become a burden to the international community through circumstances beyond their control.

We pray for those who scratch their living from trash heaps, from hand-outs, from the generosity of others.

We pray for those in a wealthy country like ours, driven to dependence upon food banks.

We pray for a proper sense of perspective when it comes to offering aid.

We pray that we might not allow our comfort to leave us in a state of passive endorsement of their plight.

We pray that our wealth, our influences, and our voices might be channelled to good effect.

Forgive us where gluttony and greed become the white noise that drowns out the cry for justice.

Forgive us where we invite only our peers to benefit from our hospitality.

Forgive us for our preoccupation with building bigger barns.

By your grace, help us to worship you in Spirit and in truth, so that your generosity may be made known through ours,

To the glory of Your name.

Rev Dr Simon Perry

Advent Carols 2018

25th November 2018

Today, like many of you, I received an epistle bearing glad tidings from the Prime Minister herself, promising me a 'brighter future'. It was well-timed, because the season of Advent is precisely the promise of a brighter future. It is a promise rooted in biblical history.

The readings and carols today, have outlined the development of an international political arrangement which, by the time of Jesus, had been functioning perfectly well for decades. Whilst the nation we read about had its own laws and traditions, it was really distant bureaucrats over at Europe's political capital that made all the decisions that count.

Israel had once been a great nation, but now it had become a mere vassal state for the great city of Rome. So, a lot of hope was invested in a figure who would lead his people out of this political arrangement, and into a brighter future. He was called Messiah, because he would enable Israel to take back control - to take back control of its laws, of its economy and of its borders. And if Rome didn't like it – they could 'Go whistle'. The Messiah, after all, would have God on his side.

But when this baby was born – he didn't seem particularly interested in taking back control in the way that was expected of him.

Jesus defied expectation because far from rejecting foreign law, he told people to over-comply with it: if a soldier forces you to carry his pack for a mile, carry it 2! If your superior slaps you in what is presumably the face, offer them the other cheek as well. Over-comply with those foreign laws, in order to undermine them.

Jesus defied expectation economically because in a time of extreme austerity in Lower Galilee, he had become a walking food bank - he could dish out excess quantities of food to 5000 people at a time.

And of course, Jesus defied expectation when it came to border security not only because he was a refugee, an immigrant – who could walk on water! Taking back control of borders, meant radically redefining what it is to be in and what it is to be out.

Jesus did not bring the brighter future anyone expected. The future he initiated was not the brighter future we march into and take by force. It is an alternative future that comes to us as a gift to be welcomed.

Rev Dr Simon Perry

Alternativity

Christmas Day 2018

In November 2008, the primary school where my son was a pupil sent me a disturbing letter. “Dear Mr Perry. Your child is an animal... at this year’s nativity play. He will be playing the role of Pig.” Bearing in mind that law-abiding first century Palestinian folk did not eat pigs, or keep pigs, or even touch them – that must have been one of the safest pigs in history.

This was the same school, but not the same year, that the wise men brought gifts for Jesus. Unfortunately, one of the wise men unwrapped the gift he was supposed to hand on to the baby Jesus, while he was queuing outside the stable, was disappointed with the contents and so attempted to grab the frankincense off the other miniature wise man. A full on fisticuffs broke out on stage.

Different school, different year. When Mary and Joseph arrived at the inn in Bethlehem. And for some reason, when they asked the innkeeper if he had a room for the night – he replied ‘yes’. With razor sharp 8 year old intuition, Joseph popped his head round the door, said, “we’re not staying in this dump. Come on Mary, Let’s go to the stable.” (Much to the parents’ horror, the word he used was not actually dump was not actually dump)!

Of course, these little departures from the script can seem like mistakes. But I suspect the reason they work, is that they are more realistic than the traditional nativity scene we have all imagined. According to the historical documents, there is a slightly different story.

The holy family were probably not signing into Bethlehem’s Travelodge, but most likely staying in a relative’s house, so weren’t really in a position to leave a strongly worded 1 star review on Trip Advisor. Where on earth a place like Bethlehem was going to house three kings is beyond me – but it’s okay, because there were no kings, it was only three wise men, from modern day Iraq. And as for the shepherds – these people were the least trustworthy folk in the entirety of the known world, the first century equivalent of estate agents. There is an irony that these dodgy sock-washing nocturnal sheep-herders were selected by angels to be the prime witnesses of all that was to happen that night in Bethlehem.

The real point of the nativity scene is that it reflects that the great God of glory, Lord of heaven and earth, the CEO of the multiverse, becomes human in the midst of the humblest, starkest, roughest, bleakest echelons of human society. He came to peasant tradesmen, in a political backwater, of an occupied province under imperial rule. He was born into the grim realities of conflict, distrust, indifference, harshness, and hostility.

The messed up world, where the script has been abandoned, turmoil is the norm and the future is bleak – that is precisely point in time and space where the God of heaven and earth makes himself at home. That’s Christmas – God-with-us. God with Us, as we really are, and where we really are.