

Proverbs 8:1, 21-31; John 1:1-14

This is a rather odd sermon, in that I hardly mention the Bible passages we've read until the very end. I promise you though, that they are both there just under the surface, feeding the whole thing. It's also a long one, so make yourselves comfortable and get some popcorn.

But first.

What do you think about church being closed?

Everyone, I'm sure, understands the reasons why. We all know we're in the middle of a major public health crisis. We know reducing the rate of infection is crucial, which means reducing social contact, which means shutting down all but the most essential things ... which means, it seems, shutting churches.

But: isn't Church essential? Or is it, when push comes to shove, just the same as the pub, or the gym? Trying to explain recently to someone why their church was closed, a colleague met with no success. Well, vicar, came the sad response. 'Either it really matters, or it doesn't. And I guess, for you, it doesn't.'

Well. Unsurprisingly, I don't take that view. I think, on balance, we were right to close, but I hate it, as I imagine you do. It's doing real damage. It was only ever an emergency measure and as soon as we possibly can, we'll reverse it.

But that man's response does pose a challenge. Not so much in terms of this particular emergency, but more generally. Do we think it matters – really, really matters – whether we come to church? Or indeed, more fundamentally, whether people believe in God – and not just believe in him, but as Jesus said, love Him, with all their hearts, and souls, and mind, and strength? Is it really our number one priority? If you're a parent, or a grandparent, say, where it would rank in your hopes for your little one? Would you say: 'physical health, happiness, education, friends, prospects, happiness are all good things, of course, but they take second place to whether this child knows God.'? Would you follow the logic, and prioritise helping them know God *over* helping them do well at school, fit in socially, and grow up fit and keen and healthy?

I suspect that most of us, if we're honest, would say no. God's not *unimportant*, of course, but He is rather more the icing on the cake. Give us a child who's happy, healthy, loving, and has a decent future ahead of them: that's what we really want. If they also believe: great, really great. But if not, well it might be a little sad, but not the end of the world. After all, isn't it their values that really matter, and what kind of person they are? Just because they won't say the Creed and don't come to church doesn't mean they're not a good person, a moral person, even in their own way a deeply spiritual person – and that's what counts, right? That's what the word *Christian* really means anyway, isn't it: good, moral, spiritual. If the child turns out that way, job done. Mission accomplished.

Well, unsurprisingly I want to complicate that picture. Not to condemn it, not say it's all wrong and terrible, but to at least show why it's not *enough*. And why the question of God remains the central question, *the* most important question, facing each and every one of us.

You see, believing – or not – in God is a very different kind of thing than believing in, say, ghosts. Ghosts could exist, or not exist, and frankly it needn't make any difference to your life at all. They would just be one more item – or not – on a long list of all the things there are in the world. It would indeed be very *interesting* if they existed. But what it wouldn't do is tell you what life is about. About why you exist, and what you are meant to do. Only the God-question does that. And that makes it way, way more important than ghosts and aliens and the Loch Ness monster or any other question you care to mention.

Because, you see, what the God question really drives at is this. *Either* this world is here by accident, or it is not. Either there is a purpose behind the world, behind us, or there is not. That's the God-question. And how you answer it matters very much indeed. Because, you see, *if there isn't* – if nobody made us and nobody meant us, it follows that there is nothing we are *meant* to be. If nobody meant us, there's nothing we are meant to be.

And *that* would mean that there's no real standard by which we could say that one way of living is any better than another. We might indeed get together and agree we'd all be better off if people were kind and generous and loving. But what happens when someone doesn't *want* everyone to be better off? After all, why should they? Why shouldn't they rob and torture and kill and do whatever they want? We might protest that such behaviour is appalling and terrible, but all we'd mean is that they're breaking the rules we've made up. We couldn't actually say they were bad human beings. We couldn't say they'd missed the point, or let themselves down, or failed to be what they were meant to be – because, in a world without God, there is no *meant*. There's no intention, there's no purpose, behind things. There's just ... things.

Now, this point often gets misunderstood, so let me spell it out very slowly. I am not saying for a moment that atheists cannot be good people. That would be stupid. What I am saying, though, is that the moment you even begin to speak of 'good' people, of 'better' people and 'bad' people, you have introduced the idea of something a human being *should be*. You are claiming there's a standard, a purpose, something to live up to, by which people can be held to account. You've introduced *should*. And in a world without God, you don't really get to have *should*. Richard Dawkins put it best: for atheism there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, just blind, pitiless indifference.

To believe in God, though, is to say that reality is not indifferent. We believe in a *should* written into the very heart of things. We say that the evil person has not just made a choice which is inconvenient for the rest of us. No. We say they've defied the *should*. They've gone against the very purpose of their own existence, they've failed as a human being. And even if they prosper for now, as they often do, we say they've wrecked themselves. Made themselves rotten. There's a law in our being, a law about how we're meant to be, and in the long run you cannot flout it any more than you can the law of gravity. The consequences may take longer, but come they will, in this world or the next.

But remember, we started this service with a confession. When we speak of bad people, we're not speaking of some other group, apart from us. We've all flouted the *should*. Most of us go on flouting it, in more or less subtle ways all the time. Because the problem with breaking the law of your own existence is precisely that you do yourself damage. Because you broke the should, you become progressively less able to follow it. Think of evil as like junk food. It's very tasty, probably initially very satisfying. But it does two things: it gets you addicted, and makes you deeply unfit. So even when you want to stop, and start again, and get healthy and fit and back in line with the should – you find it very, very difficult. And evil is way more addictive, and way more devastating, than any amount of junk food. Well, the Gospel says that spiritually speaking, we are all in that predicament. Collectively, and individually, we are lost and broken.

Why's that *Gospel*? Well, partly because what *should* happen, if we believe that, is that we become rather more kind to each other. You screwed up? You screwed up really, really badly? Well, you know what: that's what we do. And rather than pretending that I don't, and coming down on you really hard, I'm going to treat with you love and mercy and compassion. There's nothing dafter than one failure getting all self-righteous over another. So at one level, knowing you're a failure is really, really good news. Failures can give each other mercy.

True – but at another level, it's only really Gospel of course if you can see the way out. If you can see that we are not destined to always be failures. It's only *really* Gospel when you know there's such a thing as restoration. That the *should* is not just out there, as some stern, unbending moral law which we all stand judged by. No. Our Gospel is that the *should* became flesh. That there was a man in whom life was lived truly, who did not break the law of our being, who was exactly what He was meant to be. A man who, as he put it, loved the Lord his God with all his heart, and soul, and mind and strength, and loved his neighbour as Himself, and who did nothing but that, all the way down, in every moment of his life. A man who embodied the should. Who was the should, made flesh.

And even more gloriously, as St. John puts it, from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. That is to say: Jesus did not just become one of us. He did not just show us the *should* in all its perfection. He promises to pour it into us.

Left to ourselves, you see, we are irretrievably damaged goods. We've drifted so far from the *should*, we've become so addicted to the junk of sin and evil. We have wrecked ourselves comprehensively, and we're not coming back. Left to ourselves, that is. *But we are never left to ourselves.* Because, John says, here He comes. Here he comes, into the wreckage. Into the lostness. The *should* made flesh, steering himself right into the heart of our catastrophe. Here he comes, onto the Cross, into the midst of us - ready to give and give and give, to pour everything that was right about Him into everything wrong about us. He's going to raise us up. He's going to undo the damage. He's going to make me and you ready, once again, to live the *should*. To be what we were meant to be. We will receive from his fullness, grace upon grace.

Knowing that? That's the most important thing ever. That's truly essential. Let's make sure everyone knows it.

To him be the glory, forever and ever.

Amen.