The Department of Asset and Space Management 28 February

My house backs onto the University Parks. Our garden ends and an area of woodland with beech, hornbeam and yew begins and our fence divides the two. On Wednesday I, and several of my neighbours, received a very unfriendly letter from a University department calling itself ‘Asset and Space Management’ – nothing to do with NASA I might add - adopting an indignant bureaucratic tone, to the effect that if we entered the Parks by any other means than the official gates we would be in trouble. If we even thought of making access through our back fence then measures would be taken…those fences would be blocked up. Boo sucks to you. Well, none of us enters the Parks at times when it is closed. We do not smoke pot in the adjoining woodland, or dig up the cricket pitch with a spade, or ride or push bicycles in the University’s Space Asset, which is forbidden, or poison the fish in the Asset’s pond. We are sober citizens who make friendly conversation with Parks employees, gaze appreciatively at the snowdrops, find a sense of well-being there, and occasionally jog around the perimeter.

I was once a good high jumper, believe it or not. Would it be an offence if I were to leap over the fence in order to be in the Parks? Or, if I had a trampoline at the bottom of my garden, would it be improper for me to use the Parks having *bounced* in? Or if I were the Angel Gabriel, and flew in on golden wings, would that be wrong? If you are entitled to be there, does it matter how you enter? The Space Asset belongs to the Chancellor, Masters and Scholars of Oxford University. But, I am a Master, so am I not in an important sense one of the co-owners? Indeed when I first came to Oxford all MA s were permitted to have a key and to enter at any time of day or night.

Perhaps I will send the Curators a text from Matthew Chapter Seven that they might like to write up in shining letters at all their entrances: ‘Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction.’

So the good neighbours of Norham Gardens are feeling resentful and ungraciously treated. They *think* they’re acting responsibly but find themselves being ticked off like fifth formers caught smoking behind the bike sheds.

I tell you this parable because there are many who have a similar experience in relation to religion and the Church. Church and Religion is a space/asset they like to enjoy, stroll about in and reflect in, but they feel resentful if they’re constantly told that there’s only one way in and that if they don’t come in that way and believe the right thing then they’re not welcome.

So I was just wondering whether we feel the same when we’re exhorted to repent. Does this Lenten voice sound like a jobsworth bureaucrat, or an overbearing schoolmaster? We think we are doing our best; we’re trying to live a moral life, but we’re constantly being told how sinful we are. Does this message make us want to say mind your own business, leave us alone, stop fussing? I hope not because I think personal re-evaluation and reassessment of priorities is good for you. It’s like (if you’re a drinker of alcohol) having two booze free nights a week. It clears the system.

Generally we’re not a society that goes in much for breast-beating or sackcloth and ashes these days. We want affirmation, positive feedback, a list of our strong points. When you’re asked to write a reference, there’s a note at the top saying the candidate will have access to what you write. So naturally you only say nice things and, if you think they’re totally unsuitable for the job, you can’t really say so.

This feels like a contrast to the days of the old Prayer Book where, In the confession at matins and evensong we say, ‘There is no health in us.’

At Holy Communion, in the old rite, we refer to our misdoings, claiming that ‘the remembrance of them is grievous unto us; the burden of them is intolerable.’ And there’s also significance about the placing of the confession immediately before the reception of the bread and wine; what you might think of as the most sacred moment. Whereas in our modern service we get confession out of the way right at the beginning of the service before we’re really awake.

And in the old rite the confession runs on in to the Prayer of Humble Access. ‘We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table’. A biblical allusion to the story of the Syrophoenecian woman, a Syrian, who asks Jesus to heal her daughter. When Jesus says the children’s food cannot be given to the dogs, she protests that even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the rich man’s table. So when we approach the Lord’s Table we are like dogs. Or at least are no more worthy than they. This is the doctrine that we can’t earn God’s grace by our own merit, but must rely on our faith. The intellectual problem then is that many of us find that doctrine too extreme and go along with the English heretic Pelagius in thinking that we must have some responsibility for good works as well as bad works; that those who consistently show kindness, love and mercy must to so from their own free will. It can’t simply be the case that whenever we do something good it comes from God and whenever we do something bad it comes from the devil. Once again we don’t want to be treated like naughty fifth formers.

Letter to Henry: shows the cautious, bootlicking approach courtiers had to take towards a tyrant king.

Thomas to Henry: On May 2, 1536 Cranmer writes to the king in support of Ann Boleyn. He’s the only one who dares to:

"Pleaseth it your most noble Grace to be advertised, that at your Grace's commandment by Mr. Secretary's letters, written in your Grace's name, I came to Lambeth yesterday, and do there remain to know your Grace's farther pleasure. And forsomuch as, without your Grace's commandment, I dare not, contrary to the contents of the said letters, presume to come unto your Grace's presence; nevertheless, of my most bounden duty, I can do no less than most humbly to desire your Grace, by your great wisdom, and by the assistance of God's help, somewhat to suppress the deep sorrow of your Grace's heart, and to take all adversities of God's hand both patiently and thankfully…

We do not presume to come to this thy table…

Against this, the psychology of self-esteem is something the twentieth century brought to theology. We saw through Freud and Klein the conflicted nature of the human psyche; how there can be a psychological explanation for much wrongdoing and criminal behaviour and that psychological insight can sometimes be accepted in mitigation when a judge assesses a sentence.

We have come to see the psychological damage that can be done when people are made to feel inadequate, always failing, second rate, innately sinful and worthless – there is no health in us.

This psychology of conflicted self puts me in mind of another set of opposites: self-worth and self-loathing, which is big in our culture. Since 1980’s there’s been a kind of sentimental drive towards self-worth: L’Oréal – I pamper myself ‘because I’m worth it’ – and that is taken as a self-authenticating good. Yes, go for it, you deserve it. Be yourself. This is the cult of individuality, of individual rights. But you can never quite believe it.

Alternatively you might feel No one loves me. I am unlovable. It might be paranoia, but it might be failure to meet the ephemeral pressures of a society such as promoted in advertising, magazines, and TV: body shape, money, an ideal of relationship. There are pathologies of self-loathing that lead to self-harm, resort to drugs and alcohol. Depression. Because I don’t feel worth it and because I am repulsive to others – or so I feel. Rejected.

When we ask that fundamental existential question about the meaning of life and the point of our existence, it’s often because we’re facing the stark reality of isolation and despair: illness, bereavement, breakdown of a relationship, financial crisis, imprisonment, self-loathing for one reason or another.

Christianity has always taught forgiveness. Reconciliation. Acceptance in the big picture. I.e. God accepts you warts and all, forgives you, wipes the slate clean. And hopefully you will find this convincing, because it’s acceptance on a universal scale rather than the qualified acceptance that we tend to offer in the one on one human relationship. The problem is most of us have a bit of the bureaucrat in us when it comes to justice and mercy.