



18 October 2009
St Luke the Evangelist
Choral Evensong
Romans 5 v. 12– 6 v. 4
John 11 vv. 1–16

Whatever! Indifference makes a World of Difference



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Thanks for the invitation and welcome by the Dean and the Master.

Reiteration of the topic of the sermon: In a series on the modern deadly sins: **Whatever ...**

Introduction: Whatever – last week

Last week I was struck three uses of the word ‘whatever’.

1. ‘Whatever – am I bothered?!’ - Last week’s newspapers’ reported the most annoying phrase for concluding a discussion was **whatever**.
2. ‘Whatever it takes’; - I took part in a course on *good to great* that I looked at management and included a section on level 5 leadership: level 5 leaders face the brutal facts and then do **whatever** it takes [cf Obama!]
3. ‘Whatever Works’ – Wood Allen’s latest film is about a grumpy old man who discovers that the most important thing in life is to do those things, however temporary, that show others a measure grace, to show value to others in **whatever** way works

Whatever - My Africa Challenge

About a year into my present job (Spring 2001) I concluded Christianity wasn’t working and couldn’t work. I found myself becoming weary with God and my vocation, and with church and Christianity. For example the project of world mission seemed inseparable from the spent project of the Enlightenment. The Rwanda revival and the Rwanda genocide could stand for the culmination of the mission project and the end of the enlightenment project - both looked exhausted. It was not simply the tension between revival and genocide I found myself struggling with, but the loss of a Christian way of living with this contradiction. I wasn’t depressed; I just couldn’t be bothered to struggle with this business of faith any longer. What I don’t think I realised was that I was sinning.

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My lack of care was neither the indifference of fatalism nor the indifference of demonising the culprits. I didn't just say 'oh well that's how it is with religion in Africa' or 'that's what happens in an Africa distorted by the failed scramble *out of Africa*'. It was not that the idealism of revival failed to cope with the reality of modern genocide, rather it was that violence was committed by, with and against those of faith and also by those who had now born the white man's burden of the modern nation state. Social institutions, ideologies and religion were all compromised; political idealism and practical revival died in the genocide. I was weary with the whole business of trying or believing that I could make sense of it all. A dryness of spirit began, classically called *acedia/accidie*: a sin.

As Gillian Rose writes

I am abused and I abuse
I am the victim and I am the perpetrator
I am innocent and I am innocent
I am guilty and I am guilty

My Whatever and Africa

It might seem odd that I should associate myself closely with the Rwanda crisis, especially given that I had been working in Kenya when the genocide and its fall-out happened. But in my new role in CMS I was responsible for the integration of the Rwanda mission into CMS and as part of that process I had visited the region and seen the massacre sites. On my return to Britain, I realised that I was dealing with something deeper than dissonance; I was dealing with how you live with dissonance and I was aware that my way of doing that wasn't working any longer. My Christianity wasn't working at the deepest level of hope and in the practical expression of public discipleship.

My struggle played into that other daily process, mostly unrecognised, of holding together first the daily experience of life with second reflections on that experience using, third, learnt patterns of celebrating, coping and meaning-making. When we become aware of this third element, and what resources it, we normally do so as part of the growing-up process and/or of becoming a Christian. But if this third element becomes the issue itself we are forced to do the hard work of remaking our faith and addressing, at a new level often over a sustained period, our personal capacity and sinfulness.

The great communicators of the faith help us see everyday life anew by reconnecting us with the reflective tradition of our faith. We're not aware of how they do it because we are drawn into the confidence of the new coherence they create and paint for us. My problem was that I could no longer believe in the communicator's gift – it had become a sleight of hand that hid a broken middle, the broken middle of my faith. I did not hear many public Christians talk about the practical reality of what I began to realise was my encounter with sin – the sin of *acedia*. This sin is our culpability for our failed attempt to consciously address our human brokenness and our violence.

The Middle Place – the Classical Whatever of *acedia*

The 3rd century Abbas and Ammas of the Desert describe the experience of the midday demon. They talk about the indifference and lack of care and distraction that comes after the early enthusiasm and the attention of the morning. With the heat of the day and the lack of focus and loss of meaning in the present task comes the temptation to despair – to give up, to stop caring. This is the sin of *acedia*. *Acedia* goes in and out of the list of seven classic sins. It is the eighth deadly sin that may actually be the root of all the others - the sin that makes a world of difference. My spiritual director didn't tell me I was sinning, but I came to realise in a Romans 5 way that I was.

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Acedia is the sin of not accepting the present moment's task and context as God's ongoing formation and revelation of himself in our lives. It's the sin of resisting or avoiding the tuition of the Master Teacher by not caring, or by becoming indifferent, to his urges and requests to do what is needed in the daily disciplines that make a world of difference. The middle of the day is the broken middle of our lives and our faith; acedia is the avoidance of this reality as itself broken, needing the courage of a practical response that becomes the place of learning and negotiation where God is truly found. It is the place of confronting the violence of our own life and the violence of life. It's the place to discover Jesus, of knowing what he means when he says 'this is my body broken for you'.

Was it in the noon of the day that Adam and Eve were tempted? Was it then that they reached out for the fruit that would allow them to avoid the learning and negotiating that would truly be the place where God is found in daily work and its relationships? Adam and Eve exceeded their limits and reached for more so as not to live with less. Sin entered through one man, the Spirit enters through another. His way is the broken middle of the cross. His place of loss is both the foundation of the world and the foundation of our faith. We have been justified to live for Christ in his way, broken like him in the noon of the day. We find the next step of faith is to care about the next thing.

The Wider Whatever of the West

The sin of 'whatever' is the avoidance of caring for others in a world of difference. In the West we can create a world based on a constructed world of our own: we can be indifferent to others and live our story in the fantasy of our culture and riches. With more than enough we don't have to accept others' reality. We can use difference to justify our preference and pretend others can live theirs. We avoid the violence we do to others and the imposition that is needed to limit indifference.

We've also imagined, in a reiteration of our early belief in the verity of the dominant ideology thesis, that education would somehow change the structures and behaviour of the two-thirds world. Yet our collective disenchantment with the failure of ideology is not matched by any agreed philosophy of education that might address the acedia of our own culture in which there are now diminishing resources for addressing the broken middle of our modernist culture. Many are realising that it's only the resources of religion, and I would say Christianity (cf Habermas!), which can address our malaise.

The sin of whatever is not just the sin of self-absorption; it is also the sin of believing the images of our own self-absorption – the culture of celebrity and consumption. Even in our attempts to care for others we present the personalised images of our charity. There are over one billion people in poverty who will never be touched by our Aid and will be barely affected by our fair-trade. We need a new engagement that goes beyond Aid and Trade, and addresses the problems of negotiating intervention to challenge corruption and to change international law. We need Christians who believe that what the Spirit of Christ offers is the hope that raises people from the death of poverty.



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Jesus' Whatever for Us

When Jesus failed to respond to the death of Lazarus he appeared indifferent. When Jesus seems to change his mind and visit the now grieving relatives of Lazarus, Thomas takes his decision as an acknowledgement of defeat. 'The Jesus-dream has come to an end we might as well go off and die with him in his last act of taking on the religious authorities and accepting the finality of death.'

Jesus' indifference was the indifference that makes a world of difference in the way that only the one who can claim to be the Resurrection and the Life can make. He can raise us from the death of our sin because he is the new life beyond the broken middle of our lives. His indifference to our death is actually the indifference of knowing what it takes to make new life: to negotiate the practical challenges of violence and pass on through that to resurrection. That learning he has received he now gives to us by the Spirit in our daily lives. He is our Master Teacher because he had broken the middle of acedia and is its Resurrection.

My Whatever, Again

And what of me and CMS? Well, as you can tell I've moved on in faith [my struggle lasted about six years]. I find myself endorsing CMS' new strapline, *Sharing Jesus, Changing Lives*, as my new commitment to public discipleship for world mission - whatever my sin of indifference! I applaud the grumpy old man of Woody Allen's film: whatever small thing makes a difference, do it be it ever so temporary a measure of grace, do it. It makes a world of difference.

Reading

'Acedia' in Michael Downey (ed): *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality* (Theol Pub in India 1995)

'Accidie' in Gordon Wakefield (ed): *A Christian Dictionary of Spirituality* (SCM 1985)

Paul Collier: *The Bottom Billion* (Oxford 2008)

Jurgen Habermas: *Time of Transitions* (Polity 2006)

Kathleen Norris: *The Noonday Demon* (Lion 2008)

Gillian Rose: *The Broken Middle* (Blackwell 1992)

David Runcorn: *The Road to Growth Less Travelled: Spiritual Paths in a Missionary Church* (Grove 2008)

Nigel Tubbs: *Philosophy of the Teacher* (Blackwell 2005)

Rowan Williams: 'Between Politics and Metaphysics: Reflections in the wake of Gillian Rose' in Mike Higton (ed): Rowan Williams: *Wrestling with Angels* (SCM 2007)

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