



25 October 2009
Trinity XX
Choral Evensong
Jeremiah 31 vv. 31–33
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Perfectionism

By Christina Rees

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May the words of my mouth and the mediations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

It's a great pleasure to be here at St John's. I live just over the Cambridgeshire border in a small village in Hertfordshire which is in the Diocese of St Albans. When Robert Runcie was Bishop of St Albans, he used to refer the area I live in as the 'wild hill tribes of the North' which makes us sound rather fierce, but I think we're quite friendly and tame these days.

When the Dean kindly invited me to preach here this evening, he asked me to come up with a new deadly sin. I wasn't allowed to address pride, greed, sloth, or lust, or any of the other traditional deadly sins, but I had to identify a new one, which is why I have chosen the vice of perfectionism.

What do I mean by that and why do I think it qualifies as a deadly sin? There is evidence of this sin all around: in a certain type of striving for academic perfection, in the goal of a certain kind of physical perfection, in the aim of a perfect lifestyle and even in the quest for an emotional and spiritual perfection.

Only losers have Bridget Jones' lives; if you want to be a player, if you want to be noticed, to make something of yourself, there's no room for personal foibles, or for a chaotic, inconsistent lifestyle, revealing a weakness of willpower and a flawed, defective character.

No, you have to have not just A- starred exam results, but an A- starred life, and so every year, I hear tragic stories of students who fail to get the A stars and, in despair, commit suicide. I read the statistics of the growing trend towards non-essential surgery, with over 30,000 women and 3,000 men in the UK opting to have some sort of cosmetic surgery every year. (Of course, I am not referring to operations which can help to transform lives of misery, pain or ridicule.) I am talking about unnecessary surgery undergone in order to conform to some idealised version of oneself.

In the world of distorted perfectionism, having a reasonably sized house and going on holiday to a nice, but perhaps not a particularly glamorous, location is not enough, so it's worth getting into debt, and working every hour of every day to impress your friends and feel good about yourself. Part of the workaholic culture in Britain is undoubtedly due to the ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor and working long hours is a matter of survival for many, but for others, those who are well above the breadline, the statistics of divorce, the breakdown of all types of family relationships, the results of stress, and the abuse of prescription and non-prescription drugs, reveal an unhealthy striving towards an unrealistic and idealised - airbrushed - lifestyle.

Even one's personal belief system is no longer something that one is allowed to wrestle with, or to have doubts about, but rather needs to be polished. I can't just be a Christian, I have to be a happy – smiley – shiny – successful Christian and I'm not really allowed any personal lapses or failures, and if I have doubts or trip up, I must desperately try to keep the veneer of someone who's just fine – who's got it all together.

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The type of perfectionism which I am calling a sin is not the laudable striving for excellence. It is not the healthy human drive to achieve, to make something of one's life. It is a far cry from the utterly natural desire to live a good and comfortable life, to be admired, respected, and liked. It is taking all those understandable and essentially worthy aims and turning them into something quite different. It is the distortion of healthy ambition and the valid search for a sense of purpose, meaning, identity and belonging. It goes beyond those things to where perfectionism becomes, not one's goal, but one's god.

As with the deadly sins of pride and lust, this type of perfectionism distorts what is natural and potentially good and creative and life-giving in us, and, instead, causes a closing in on oneself, and ultimately a self-destructive way of seeing and living life. This type of driven life is one that has been set adrift from any reference to God, something or someone bigger than oneself, or to the values of the Kingdom of God, those topsy-turvy values Jesus preached about to the crowds in his sermon on the mount. "Happy are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God. Happy are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. Happy are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Happy are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." Jesus's words astonished and challenged his listeners then, and continue to perplex and confound us today.

Also in the sermon on the mount, Jesus spoke the words we heard in the reading from Matthew. "You have heard it said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy, but I say to you 'love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.'" That passage ends with the charge, "You must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

But that's impossible! How can Jesus demand that we are perfect the way God is perfect? Isn't that even a bit blasphemous? What did Jesus mean by saying that we must be perfect 'as our heavenly Father is perfect'?

The clue – the key – to being perfect in the way that Jesus calls us to be perfect – is to be perfected in love, to accept the unconditional love of God and to allow ourselves to be transformed by that love.

So much of the unholy perfectionism I have described has fear, or disordered pride, at its core, fear of failure, fear of rejection, fear of lack of recognition, lack of meaning. But we are forgetting something. When God looks at us, with all our flaws and faults, God does not see the flaws, the imperfections which haunt and shame us. God only sees the perfection of who Jesus was. This is part of what it means to be 'in Christ,' to be part of the 'new creation' that St Paul wrote about.

Ultimately, the sin of perfectionism is a negation of the cross of Jesus Christ.

It ignores the love that took Jesus to the cross and which brought him out of the grave. It is blind to the liberating, transforming power of God's love.

When he was an old man, the disciple John wrote, "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and the one who is fears is not perfected in love. We love, because God first loved us."



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The ultimate goal of the perfection we are called to, the perfection of love, is the complete reconciliation of all things in Christ to God. As we seek to live lives worthy of that calling - or to attain excellence in any field, we discover pretty quickly that requires hard work, discipline, stamina, commitment, dedication, sacrifice. The difference between that and the disordered striving for perfection is our understanding of who we and others are in the context of a world in which we and our own self-will is not at the centre of our lives, in which our own strivings, valid and worthy as they may be, do not eclipse the assent and worship of someone greater than ourselves, but who, no matter what, continues to love us with a never-ending love.

A friend of mine realised at some point that he had put himself very firmly at the centre of his life. He recognised in himself a disordered pride and self-will. Then, one day he had a most extraordinary experience of suddenly knowing himself to be properly re-aligned within himself and with God. Even after that he still has to wake up every morning and say to himself, as much as to God, 'all right, who's going to be God today?' Amen.