



9 October 2011
Trinity XVI
Sung Eucharist
Philippians 4 vv. 1–9
Matthew 22 vv. 1–14

God Does Not Flatter
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The Dean

Sermon starts here... A few years back, an American journalist, Richard Stengel produced a little book entitled 'You're too kind: A brief history of flattery'ⁱ. Naturally he mentioned this to a number of his friends. Their faces lit up :

“What a brilliant idea! Yes, that’ll be a fantastic book. And you’re just the person to write it.’

Initially he was deeply gratified by their response, then he realised they were of course joking. Flattery goes a long, long way – as we all know – indeed knowledge of the effectiveness of flattery is hard-wired into the professional practices of a number of areas of modern life. This last week we have seen the exposure of con-man ‘Lord’ Eddie Davenport – a man who persuaded many prominent people to making down-payments to him, flattered and charmed by the fact that he seemed so incredibly well connectedⁱⁱ: Victims interviewed testified in essence to that fact that his appearance in photographs with so many celebrities was cast iron proof of his trust-worthiness.

The reason flattery is so effective is perhaps a little more scary – namely that as human beings we want almost nothing in life more than, so acutely as, feeling better about ourselves. Indeed, if you start looking at the world and individuals with that perspective you will see that this desperate seeking for worth and self-worth underpins a whole galaxy of forms of human striving for recognition, for ways that people can think to themselves: ‘I’m not too bad really’.

As we gather once again at the beginning of a new academic year to join in worship, it is worth reminding ourselves of this perennial and central human striving to be valued, to matter, to count, to belong. The giving, the ascription of worth, of worth-ship lies at the heart of what we do in this chapel; and in that worship what we are saying is that there is a solid foundation to the notion of unconditional LOVE; that God does really love each and every person; that our true worth as people is located not in our achievements, not in our work, not in what people say about us or the half-truths or mantras we whisper to ourselves, not even in our supportive relationships, but rather in the fact that we are children of a God whose love is utterly unconditional and free. It can’t be earnt; it can’t be merited; it simply is. Our difficulty lies of course in our ability to accept this.

Yet this is the bedrock of the Christian faith and it lies at the heart of what is otherwise a pretty difficult and fierce-looking parable that combines radical inclusivity and judgement: Those initially invited who find that they have a ‘subsequent engagement’ and indeed turn to violence are the leaders of the Jewish people, those who ultimately in Matthew’s account bring about Jesus’s death; the subsequent invitation is completely open-handed, inclusive, it is to everyone, everyone regardless, irrespective of merit – ‘both good and bad’. This is the scandal, the outrage, the offensive heart of the matter in the Christian gospel – that God’s love is completely unconditioned by human judgement or perception of worth; we simply have to turn up and join in.

ⁱThe contents of this paper are the views and expressions of the author.

ⁱⁱThe contents may not be used without the permission of the author, more information can be obtained from chapel@joh.cam.ac.uk



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But God's love cannot be reduced simply to a self-esteem movement that pretend that we are entirely fine just the way we are; the offer of God's love comes with an invitation to join a party; a party which celebrates a distinctive set of values and judgments about the world. We are fully accepted as we are that we might become transformed and this is the point about the man who refuses to wear the wedding garments: he refuses the terms, he refuses to be open to transformation, refuses to accept the values and priorities of the wedding feast that is the Kingdom of God. He is simply 'on the take', whereas the responsive guest 'is on the give'. True acceptance involves being known thoroughly in all our troubles, confusions, and limitations; involves bringing all that we are, our anxieties, our concerns, our needs, our frustrations, our sorrows, the small triumphs which puff us up, the caresses to our egos that flatter and deceive, bringing all of this to be offered up, to be handed over to God that we might increasingly put on '...whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable' (Phil 4:8). Unlike flash Eddie Davenport, whose business was in the words of the Judge, packing him off to prison, 'essentially worthless. Its only business was fraud', God is simply not a flatterer and it is in giving worth to him that we participate in the divine economy and discover our own value – as infinitely precious in his sight. Amen.

ⁱ www.amazon.co.uk/Youre-Too-Kind-History-Flattery/dp/0684854910

ⁱⁱ www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2045548/Lord-Edward-Davenport-jailed-8-years-ripping-rich-famous-500m-con.html