

## **8<sup>th</sup> Sunday Year C**

### **Sunday next before Lent**

**Luke 6.39-45**

**Peter Groves**

Yesterday, somewhat to my surprise, I found myself repeatedly quoted in the national press. Those who know me might think it even more surprising that the newspaper was the Daily Telegraph. But that's not so remarkable, because a friend and parishioner who is a Telegraph journalist has a habit of consulting me if he's delving into the obscurities of West London football. I went round the other day for a coffee, knowing he was preparing a piece about who does and doesn't love, like, hate or respect one another in the footballing worlds of Hounslow, Hammersmith, Fulham and Chelsea. I didn't realise I would be mentioned by name, and quoted several times. I certainly didn't realise that the only other person who would be named and quoted in this piece was David Mellor. The jury is out as to whether I can ever be welcomed back to Shepherds Bush.

Excellent writer that he is, my friend had turned my kitchen table ramblings into something like intelligent commentary. I was flattered. But in one case, for perfectly good reasons, he had changed something factual I said very slightly, and changed it such that a reader as obsessive about the details of football as myself, might have thought I had got something wrong. Horror of horrors. Like any good, introverted Oxonian, I worry about few things as much as being wrong in public.

That fear is instructive, because I'm not actually all that afraid of being wrong. I wouldn't be much of a Christian if I were. But that's not the problem, the problem is that I am afraid of being seen to be wrong. Shyness and self-centredness are very closely connected. Pride prays on whatever weakness it can find. The fact is, no-one else is bothered, no-one else cares the proverbial too hoots about the detailed order of footballing events in 2011, and certainly no-one else could care less about whether I have got that detailed order right or wrong.

But I, stupidly, do care. What will everyone think? Those are the words which oppress me, words which form one of the most pernicious questions in Christian discourse. What will everyone think? They are not peculiarly Christian, of course – snobbery and one-upmanship belong both within and without the community of faith. But they allow a particular Christian failing to take its hold. They allow us to pretend that the harshness with which we judge ourselves is the fundamental rule of Christian living.

Jesus warns us against the idiocy of the blind leading the blind. If we wish to love others, to contribute creatively to the world around us, we need to know what we are doing. Last week, the emphasis was on loving our enemy – not on feeling good about that person, but on doing the loving thing. Today, again, the emphasis is not on feeling, but it is in part on thinking. How do we reflect on ourselves, what are our thoughts and judgements of our own behavior towards and relationships with others? This prayerful Christian thinking is what we call self-examination, and it is an

essential practice if we are properly to keep the season of Lent.

Self-examination can be well or badly done. If I'm obsessed with my own failings, my greatest fear will be their discovery by others. I will be most afraid of being seen to be wrong, or idle, or mendacious, or whatever. If I'm convinced that my view of myself is decisive, then I am making the rules, not attending to the unconditional love which is Jesus's rule of Christian living.

We are all familiar with this basic and very private Christian phenomenon which we might call the truth about ourselves. Each of us, if we are honest, resists God's call not just to love him and to love others, but to love ourselves as redeemed children of God. Each of us, from time to time, takes a kind of ghoulish comfort in the thought that, though people think and speak well of us, though others love us and we are able to flourish in the world, nevertheless deep down we know the real truth, which is that we are failing and useless and wicked. In this context, our principal fear is not of

failing – for we know we always fail – it is of being found out by those around us, those who seem to us to do so very much better than we do.

The truth, of course, is that each of us has this in common. By keeping it to ourselves we are able to indulge the fantasy that we are uniquely bad, but this itself is – paradoxically – an example of pride. Our sins are no worse than our neighbour's. There is nothing special about our failings. We try, and sometimes we do badly. We do well from time to time. And we mess things up from time to time. We love others and we hurt others. And we do all this because we are human beings, and human beings are that sort of creature.

In the coming days and weeks, many people will join a priest in the celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation, that is, they will make their confession. In so doing, they recognising that a life focused entirely on self is a life which cannot but be anxious, which cannot see beyond the cares and the burdens which dominate our own tiny corner of the world. Laying

before God our sins and our weaknesses is admitting, confessing, the truth that we cannot do this human business on our own. To try is to fail, and to try without help is to fail without hope. Lent moves us towards the passion of Christ, towards that climactic moment when every aspect of our lives is borne by another. To come to the confessional is to kneel in the presence of the saviour and allow him to remove, one by one, those things which weigh us down, those cares and anxieties and faults and failings, and to watch him nail them one by one to the cross of our salvation, so that we may rise with him to the joy of God's reconciling love.

Preparing for our confession – either in a formal sacramental sense, or in the simple prayerful act of offering ourselves to God as part of our daily devotions – must involve self-examination. But that self-examination is only properly an examination if we admit the ordinariness, the simplicity, the humility, of that which we are examining. Trying to be loving, taking the plank from our own eye, is not an act of grandiose self-abasement, and is unlikely to involve a

dramatic Damascus Road type conversion of life. Instead, it is about knowing who we are and knowing that we are who we are because we are loved by God.

Among the most important lessons the confessional can teach is the truth that God does not love the person we would like to be. God does not love that person, because that person does not exist. God loves us. God loves you, God loves me, in all our mess and pride and weakness and shame, God loves you and me, and he loves for us no reason whatsoever other than his own self. God loves us because love is what God does, and love is what God does because love is what God is.

There is no other God than this. Just as the person you would like to be does not exist, so also the vengeful God of judgement with whom you threaten your own heart, is a figment of your imagination. God gives us Lent to lead us into love, to walk us to Jerusalem and on that way of sorrows to knock love into our recalcitrant heads. If we look at ourselves in darkness, we must remain blind. If we allow ourselves to be led by the love which

makes us human, then the world, and our place within it, will look very different indeed.