

St Peters, Ealing,  
Sunday 28<sup>th</sup> February 2016  
Lent 3

Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters... come, buy, eat.

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In my humble opinion one of the most exciting and challenging brains in the field of 21<sup>st</sup> century theology in this country today is Sarah Coakly, Norris-Hulse Professor of Divinity at the University of Cambridge. She has recently published a new book that I think has really important insights to offer. The New Asceticism: sexuality, gender and the quest for God published by Bloomsbury Press. It offers some really important theo-psychological reflections based upon the insights of St Gregory of Nyssa, a fourth century Greek theologian.

As far back as then St Gregory was reflecting on the human condition and its propensity to selfishness and a lack of engagement with God, evidenced in a misunderstanding of the place of desire within the human relationship. One which should be ultimately about the expression of sexuality in the building up of the community, yet becomes a selfish act of personal gratification. For Gregory desire should be the 'glue of society'. As Sarah explains, in St Gregory's view, "The 'erotic' desire that initially draws partners together sexually has also to last long enough, and to be refined in God, as to render back to society what originally gave those partners the possibility of mutual joy: that means service to the poor and outcast, attention to the frail and the orphans, consideration of the fruit of the earth and its limitations, a vision for the whole in which all play their part, both sacrificially and joyously." (The New Asceticism. p6).

Coakly's premise is that, with the rise of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century commercialism 'desire' has come to mean a self-centredness, self-gratification-al, self-fulfilling understanding of the world, highlighted by the growth of promiscuity and the lack of socio-moral barriers. Using the work of St Gregory and filtering it through the work of Freudian and Jungian schools of psychology Coakly believes we can re-understand desire as a creative, generative element of the human condition, thereby redressing our understanding of the world and our relationship to our neighbour.

If we can redress or re-capture the original understanding of desire, our world becomes less self and more other orientated, or for Coakly and St Gregory and for ourselves, more God centred. Placing God at the centre of our existence by understanding our place in a wider, more open context, we re-understand our commitment to and responsibility for each other and for and to God.

Hopefully I have not done Coakly an injustice in my thumbnail sketch of her thought and her book – which I thoroughly recommend - but I'm not completely sure this is such new territory.

Our reading from Isaiah seems to be on this wave length. Isaiah isn't referring to sexual dynamics of societal structures admittedly but he is referring to other fundamentals of life, to bread and drink. Isaiah's reference is to the spiritual basics that give life and dimension to the body, to our existence.

The people of Israel have become self-absorbed, worrying about personal, material welfare at the expenses of their relationship with God, at the expense of their very souls. Isaiah is raising the need of the people to redress their priorities, putting aside the material needs that only fill the stomach, for the spiritual needs that bring healing and wholeness, not only to the individual but to the whole nation.

As we decry the collapse in the engagement with God shouldn't we first stand back and reflect on where God is in our own lives? How often do we place decisions about ourselves and our own needs before that of God and our community?

The gospel reading today draws towards these questions. The unfortunate deaths of Galileans in the collapse of a building is brought to Jesus' attention. The premise the community would have had is that they must have been really awful people for, if they were not sinners then such a dreadful thing wouldn't have happened to them. Jesus is having none of it. If he had agreed he would have been scapegoating the sins of those around him. They could say 'Look we must be better than those Galileans, they died horribly because they were sinful, I must be better than them as that hasn't happened to me.' Jesus' response is to say two things: 1. That's not how sin and judgement works; 2. We have responsibility for each other and our concerns should be for those affected. In other words, with God properly at the centre of life our concern is for our neighbour not our self.

What would our lives be like if we consciously placed God at the centre of all that we do? If we redressed our understanding of desire – following St Gregory, seeking to see desire as something that leads us to a more community/ Godly centred existence. What would that mean for us? How would a life, living by the bread of God be? Fuller, more meaningful, more purposeful? Probably. It would be less empty and less lonely.

We gather at this altar to receive the bread and wine of the Eucharist. It is a physical bread and wine, but it means much more – the body of Christ broken for us revealing the healing love of God into our community. This is the bread that sustains, that feeds; this is the drink with out price, it is free, come and receive.

Seek the Lord while he may be found,  
Call upon him while he is near...  
Return to the Lord, that he may have mercy  
And to our God who will have abundantly pardon.