

SUNDAY WORSHIP 31st DECEMBER 2017 CASTLE HOWARD CHAPEL

+JAMES: On the eve of a New Year, welcome to North Yorkshire, to the Howardian Hills, an area of outstanding natural beauty. Rising beyond the Vale of York and crowning the landscape stands Castle Howard. To the north the Yorkshire Moors, to the south the Yorkshire Wolds. Castle Howard, the stately home of the Howard family since the 17th Century, shot to fame as the setting for the televised drama of Brideshead Revisited, the novel by Evelyn Waugh. We're here in the Chapel and on this the last Sunday of the year we have the opportunity to reflect on the past and the future. But now with the sounds and truths of Christmas still ringing in our ears we continue to celebrate the birth of Christ our Saviour.

HYMN: Unto us a child is born.

+JAMES: Evelyn Waugh, the author of Brideshead said 'that everyone in his (or her) life has a moment when they are open to Divine Grace.' A time when we become aware, in spite of all the troubles in the world, that there is a God and that his love is within our reach. The late AA Gill, the journalist, once wrote that faith was like a piece of string that disappears up in to the clouds and every now and then tugs a little. Spiritual episodes like this don't happen all the time. But from time to time the unexpected jolts us, making us less confident in ourselves and more open to the possibility that there might be more to this world than what we can get from our five senses. One such jolt happened to Kenneth Clark, the art historian, who was the author of another iconic television series called 'Civilisation'.

He was on his own studying religion in Florence when one day he was in the Church of San Lorenzo. For a few minutes his whole being was, he said, 'irradiated by a kind of heavenly joy, far more intense' than anything he had experienced before. It lasted for several months. He was sure that he had felt 'the finger of God'. But then he added that he made no effort to hold on to the experience, 'My life was far from blameless, he explained: I would have to reform. My family would think I was going mad, and perhaps after all it was a delusion for I was in every way unworthy of receiving such a flood of grace.' But the experience, he said, helped him to understand the joys of the saints.

PRAYER: (Led by +James and said by the Choir)

Almighty and most merciful Father, We have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep, We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts, We have offended against thy holy laws, We have left undone those things which we ought to have done and we have done those things which we ought not to have done and there is no health in us: But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us miserable offenders; Spare thou them, O God, which confess their faults, Restore thou them that are penitent, According to thy promises declared unto mankind in Christ Jesu our Lord: And grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake, that we may hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life, to the glory of thy holy Name. Amen.

ANTHEM: O Magnum Mysterium (Victoria)

+JAMES: Kenneth Clark had no doubt that the spiritual experience that he had in the Church of San Lorenzo was, to use Evelyn Waugh's, phrase 'a moment of divine grace'. But such moments are a mystery. There is no accounting for them, for the why, when and who should experience them. Such is the mystery of God in the world. The history of Christ's birth is peppered with such mysterious moments; visiting angels, a shooting star, revealing dreams, supernatural encounters and wise men with an astrologer's eye travelling from east to west in search of a child 'born to be king'. And as with many mysteries the road is far from straight forward and is strewn with obstacles.

READING: St Matthew 2; 7 – 11

"Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, inquired of them diligently what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go, and search diligently for the young child, and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also. When they had heard the king, they departed; and lo, the star which they saw in the east went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down and worshipped him: and when they opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way."

+JAMES: We can hear the familiar stories of Mary and Joseph, of the Shepherds and the Wise men and imagine that if we'd been there in their shoes we too would have opened up the treasure chest and presented our gifts. We sing carols of these acts of grace and think that we too would have worshipped and followed him. But I'm not sure that's always the case. We can be stopped in our tracks at some serendipitous moment and find all sorts of reasons for ducking the impact of what we've encountered.

In Selina Hastings' biography of Somerset Maugham, another early twentieth century novelist, there's a foot note of an incident when the writer was gazing on the painting of the Last Supper by Paolo Veronese. As he focussed on the figure of Christ in the middle of the table, at the centre of the picture, so the face of Christ turned and fixed his gaze on Somerset Maugham.

It shocked him. Was this one of those mysterious moments, a moment of grace like the finger of God on Kenneth Clark? Somerset Maugham later dismissed it as an optical illusion. Maybe it was. Or maybe it was one of those little tugs on the string that disappears up into the clouds.

ANTHEM: O God who guides the cheerful Sun (Byrd)

+JAMES: In the closing pages of *Brideshead Revisited* there are two profoundly spiritual scenes. The first is where the old Lord Marchmain returns with his mistress from self-imposed exile in Italy to the ancestral home to die.

The local priest is summoned by the family to his bedside to give him the last rites, but it's uncertain whether he will receive them as he has spent most of his life scoffing at religion.

The priest absolves him, anoints him with oil and gives him the final blessing. Lord Marchmain moves his hand to his forehead. Is it to wipe away the chrism or to make the sign of the cross? He completes the crossing of himself and returns to the faith that he has spurned.

The second scene comes in the epilogue to the novel. Charles, Sebastian's friend from their student days and through whose eyes the story is told, has like Sebastian's father spent his life arguing against faith. Years later and during the war when Brideshead has been commandeered by the army he too returns to the ancestral House. And goes to the Chapel. After years of resisting the faith he has his own moment of divine grace and writes, "I said a prayer, an ancient, newly-learned form of words...."

PRAYER: (Led by +James and said by the Choir)

Our Father which art in Heaven

Hallowed be thy name

Thy Kingdome come

Thy will be done in earth as it is in Heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread

And forgive us our trespasses

as we forgive them that trespass against us.

Lead us not into temptation

But deliver us from evil

For thine is the Kingdom, the Power and the Glory

For ever and ever, Amen.

+JAMES: However feeble and fragile our faith and whatever the motive, every prayer that we pray is a reaching out to the grace of God. So,

Lord, in the year gone by thy kingdom has seen the sowing of wheat and tares; give growth to that which is good to triumph over evil.

Thy will be done on earth

CHOIR: As it is in Heaven.

+JAMES: Lord, for the least, the last and the lonely, for the distressed and the dying and for all who grieve on a journey without ending, give grace to believe that their cries go not unheeded.

Thy will be done on earth

CHOIR: As it is in Heaven

+JAMES: Lord, for all who long for a world where justice and mercy walk hand in hand fill them with hope that such a kingdom is coming.

Thy will be done on earth

CHOIR: As it is in Heaven

+JAMES: Lord, from whom nothing can be hidden, for ourselves, for our souls and bodies, save us from what we want and grant us what we need.

Thy will be done on earth

CHOIR: As it is in Heaven

ANTHEM: New Year Carol (Britten)

+JAMES: As I look back not just on the past year but on the decades of my life there's a word that I reach for more and more. In the bad times as well as the good there's been a sense of Providence. It's captured here by Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount.

READING: St Matthew 7, 7 – 11

Jesus said, "Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on.... Behold the fowls of the air; for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they?.....Consider the lilies of the field how they grow: they toil not, neither do they spin: and yet I say unto you, that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.

Wherefore if God so clothe the grass of the field, which today is and tomorrow is cast into the oven; shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith? Seek first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all things shall be added unto you. Take therefore no thought of the morrow; for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself...."

+JAMES: Half-way through the novel of *Brideshead Revisited* Julia, Sebastian's sister laments, saying,

'Sometimes I feel the past and the future pressing hard on either side that there's no room for the present at all.'

It's true that we can be so overwhelmed by the events of the past year and so daunted by the uncertain prospect of the next that our minds and souls freeze, unable to see and respond to the acts of grace happening all around us. This past year the terrorist attacks in London and Manchester and the horrifying tragedy of Grenfell Tower made it impossible to fathom the ways of God.

Yet out of each of these disasters emerged stories of ordinary people doing extraordinary things to help the bereaved and injured – little pools of light, moments of grace in the darkness. In her Christmas Broadcast the Queen spoke of the 'privilege' of meeting patients in Manchester because of their 'extraordinary bravery and resilience'. For those with the eyes to see here were signs of the good pushing back the evil, even through such horrific life-changing events.

But these times of grace are not limited to life's extremities. They are to be found in the ordinary things of life: in the song of a bird singing out that life is being lived tunefully; in a siren – signalling that someone's hurt and some one's helping; in the sound of a plane overhead and of people journeying far to be with loved ones; in a tree showing us that the glory of what you see above the ground depends on the depth of life beneath the earth; and in the silence, that stills the soul to hear new thoughts.

It's in these common place and ordinary things of life that the extraordinary happens – moments of grace, translucent, that let the divine light shine through.

HYMN: A great and mighty wonder

Throughout my own life I've been surprised by those moments of grace in unexpected places – at a cross roads or in a crisis. Often, it's in the darkest places that the light has shone more intensely.

Six years ago, I was told I had to have a triple heart by-pass. I was so disorientated by the diagnosis and depressed by what I knew I would have to go through that when they came to ask me to sign the forms of consent I seriously thought of saying 'no'.

The weekend spent in hospital before being first up on the Monday morning became to my surprise something of a retreat. I could do no other than in my anxiety abandon myself to God. I wrote letters to my wife, Sarah, and to each of our three daughters and read 'Practising the Presence of God' by Brother Lawrence and Andrew Murray's 'True Vine', his devotional exposition of Jesus saying, 'I am the Vine'.

Shortly after the operation and on the first day of being home I was sitting at the kitchen table with a bowl of soup in front of me. It was a humble thing to say grace over, but I was so thankful to be back home. As I lifted the spoon tears fell from my eyes salting the soup until soon I was shuddering and sobbing.

It was a small thing but it triggered a catharsis – a cleansing – suddenly the fears and hopes of all my years came flooding out. There in that ordinary activity an extraordinary thing happened. Through the provision of simple food came a revelation of a Greater Providing, of Providence and of a Hand that had kept and guided me. There in the kitchen, as in the place where Brother Lawrence learnt so much about God, came a moment of divine grace.

George Herbert, the poet and priest, who knew only too well the weakness of the body could nevertheless trace the fingerprints of Providence in his own infirmities. This is 'The Pulley'.

A READER:

When God at first made man,
Having a glass of blessings standing by,
Let us (said he) pour on him all we can:
Let the world's riches, which dispersed lie,
Contract into a span.

So strength first made a way;
Then beauty flow'd, then wisdom, honour, pleasure:
When almost all was out, God made a stay,
Perceiving that alone of all is treasure
Rest in the bottom lay.

For if I should (said he)
Bestow this jewel also on my creature,
He would adore his gifts instead of me,
And rest in Nature, not the God of Nature.
So both should losers be.

Yet let him keep the rest,
But keep them with repining restlessness:
Let him be rich and weary, that at least,
If goodness lead him not, yet weariness
May toss him to my breast.

HYMN: Lord for the years your hand has kept and guided.

+JAMES: It is impossible to predict when moments of divine grace will visit us. Just as it is impossible to predict the events of the coming year. But there is a prayer written by Henry 6th that fits the uncertainty of what lies ahead and roots it in an abandonment to the will of God.

A READER:

O Lord Jesus Christ,

Who hast created and redeemed me

And has brought me unto that which now I am,

Thou knowest what thou wouldst do with me:

Do with me according to thy will

For thy tender mercy's sake. Amen

+JAMES: Such a prayer prepares the soul for whatever Providence has in store, and opens our eyes to see those moments of grace and our hearts to receive them.

BLESSING: So, may the Fire of Christ consume all indifference to God

The Light of Christ illumine our vision of God

The Love of Christ enlarge our longing for God

And the Spirit of Christ empower our service to God

And the blessing of God Almighty

The Father, The Son and The Holy Spirit

Be amongst you and remain with you always.

CHOIR: Amen.

ORGAN VOLUNTARY

The Right Reverend James Jones KBE

