

ALL SAINTS CHURCH

ADVENT SUNDAY 2023

PURITY

Malachi 3: 1 – 12

Titus 2: 11-14

INTRODUCTION

As you should all know by now, this term we have been following a series based on a book called Followers of the Way. Many of you have been tracking the talks in your home groups. The author of the book is Simon Reed, an Anglican priest or pastor in West London but he is also a leading figure in the Community of Aidan and Hilda 'an international and cross-denominational network of Christians inspired by Celtic Christianity and its associated community or monastic dimensions. Its home is Holy Island or Lindisfarne, as it is also known, up there in the cold wilds of Northumbria.

Simon Reed's book is his attempt to translate some of the features of Celtic and community-oriented Christian living into a rhythm and pattern of life for 21st century Christians who live disparate, scattered lives and who are not spending the whole of their waking and sleeping life in a single community far from the madding crowd.

If you have been reading the book or following these talks, you will know he points to ten way marks to help us walk the way of Christ – ten signposts to keep us on the straight and narrow. And then towards the end of the book, he also refers to three

living giving principles which he has taken from the monastic tradition and adapted them to a non-monastic but nevertheless disciplined way of life.

In the monastic tradition there are three great principles which are turned into vows:

- Poverty – the monk or friar has virtually no personal property or belongings
- Chastity – the monk or nun lives a celibate life
- Obedience – obedience to God but also obedience to the leaders of the community and Order you have joined.

Simon Reed has taken these three principles and:

- for poverty he has used the word simplicity;
- for chastity he has used the word purity;
- and for obedience ... well he has kept that word. Simplicity of living, purity in living and obedience.

Last week Tom Yacomeni addressed the subject of simplicity. Today I have the second principle – purity. We heard references to purity of living in both the O and NT readings. So not an easy topic to talk about and equally listen to. But let's start with a picture.

THE MAIN THING

First of all let me ask you what you think this is.

[NB Picture comes up of a gold nugget]

Yes it is gold ore or gold nugget. Gold mixed with other metals and impurities. Take it as a symbol of yourself outside of Christ and indeed inside of Christ.

Outside of Christ, we are in one way or another beggars, lost, tarnished and a whole mix of good and bad. But within that mix, in the hands of God, the redeemer and the refiner, there is gold – pure gold.

So I am going to build this talk on purity and on Titus 2 around the idea of gold and refer to both of our readings as I do so.

Gold is a symbol of purity, of value, of beauty and of eternity and of the best. In the Old Testament, in the creation of those special places where God was seen to be and where he was to be worshipped – by this I mean, the Tabernacle and the Temple, nothing but the best was to be used – fabrics, wood, incense and of course gold. Gold and indeed pure gold was to be there in extravagant profusion – the ark or chest containing the ten commandments was to be covered in gold, the poles to carry the ark were to be covered in gold, the rings for the curtains were to be gold rings, the plates used were to be of gold. The same was true of the Temple. The walls, the doors and the ceiling beams were all to be covered in gold.

[Now if you have ever looked up at the ceiling in the nave in All Saints Church you will see what looks like wooden beams with wooden round bosses at the points where they join. They aren't in fact wood but are 1830's imitation wood ie plaster. As we have been thinking about colour schemes for the church, I did think it would be lovely to have put gold leaf or even gold paint on those bosses but alas the budget won't run to it. There does not appear to have been a holdback on the budget for the building of the Temple.]

Gold is universally a sign of wealth, of durability, of faithfulness, of value. Locked up in bank vaults over all the world are gold bars. Our currency was once upon a time based on what is known as the gold standard. A trustworthy solid means of value. Here is a picture of Queen Elizabeth inspecting the gold bars in the vaults of the Bank of England. There is a huge amount of wealth stored in the bank in the form of these gold bars and it will not rust or wear out and it shines in the light.

But more precious in the eyes of God are the men and women he has created. Sadly, although created in his image and being only a little lower than the angels, he and she, you and I are flawed, are impure are less than pure, like gold ore in the ground. Every day we see horrific examples of the flaws and impurities in men and women: the killings whether in war or in personal hate and anger; the abuse of women and children; the flaunting of self and desire; the gratuitous wealth and opulence contrasted with poverty and the despoiling of the

earth. The sexualisation of almost every product. The obsession with body image rather than the inner man and woman. The pre-eminence of self and the glorification of me and my needs over the needs of others. The twisting and denial of truth. And although it is more obvious on our screens, it is there in less obvious ways in our homes, in our workplaces, in our churches and of course in us.

But by the grace of God and the working of the Holy Spirit and our own desire to be what we should be, this lump of gold ore can be refined and needs to be refined. The things that spoil us need to be taken out. Paul in our reading tells Titus who is to tell the church that *'the grace of God teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions'*

Like many things in our Christian walk, saying no to ungodliness and world passions is a lifelong exercise – and hopefully one we get better at – and not just because we are older and haven't got the energy for worldly passions!

So what are these worldly passions and ungodliness. Well they are fairly obvious but the NT has several lists of them and at the risk of making you squirm, I will read some of them.

- First from Galatians: *The acts of the flesh: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like.*

- Now from Titus: *Being overbearing, quick-tempered, drunkenness, not violent, pursuing dishonest gain; gluttony; laziness; addicted to wine*
- Now from Romans: *shameful lusts; envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. gossiping, slandering, insolence, arrogance boastfulness; disobedience to parents; no fidelity, no love, no mercy*

And there are many other lists. A number of things listed there are specifically to do with sex but there are also plenty of others which are not to do with sex and are equally impure. When these lists are read out. all of us before conversion and after conversion have to put our hands up and say that we have given into some of those things. For example, we may not have committed violence or adultery in practice; we may not even have committed adultery or violence in our imagination but we have been quick-tempered or driven by envy and discontent or jealousy or even hatred of someone.

So let me ask you: in your walk with God, is it true that you are becoming less and less prone to those besetting sins of your nature and personality and less likely to fall foul of the world's ways and deceits? Do you, do I take time to review the day or days gone by and to render account to God of what you have said, done and thought? Are we working ourselves and asking Jesus himself to take out those bits of us that spoil the gold, that hide the image of God, that prevent others seeing something of Jesus in us?

Dealing with those things, confronting those things and turning away from those things can be a painful process – a

costly process. Malachi says that when God comes into the world and therefore into our lives he will be:

'Like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap .He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver.'

This involves heating up the gold ore and introducing other elements into the mix that will draw out the impurities, leaving pure gold or silver behind. In a spiritual sense that is equivalent to repentance. We hear little about repentance these days, or grieving over our sin – not that I think we should wallow in our imperfections and be constantly beating ourselves up. But maybe over the past 50 years or so, the church has been so drawn to the grace and love and mercy of God, so drawn to preaching that God wants to affirm each one of us and loves as we are that we have forgotten the cost of discipleship, of repentance of saying no to ungodliness and worldly passions. There is much in the present world that we are in love with. Paul had a staunch companion called Demas who was alongside Paul when he wrote the letter to the Colossians but by the time Paul wrote to Timothy, Demas had deserted him because he loved the world. Perhaps most of us are half in love with the world. There are lots of Demas-Christians around.

Purity is like God's gold standard. It is something we should be aiming for and working toward. You know that in gold the purity is measured in carats. There is 9 carat gold, 12 carat gold, 18 carat gold , 22 carat gold and 24 carat gold – the purest of all golds.

In Corinthians Paul talks about us becoming transformed from one degree of glory to another. I know it may not feel like that first thing in the morning but that is what is happening if we are truly following Christ. He might equally have said day by day we are being purified from one kind of gold to another. From one carat to another. Some us start out as 9 carats or maybe less but move up the scale as things that ought not be in our lives are gradually stripped out. What sort of a gold Christian are you? Are you more pure, more Christlike, more unworldly than you were last year or five years ago or ten years ago? Are you, am I, more and more like Jesus following him day by day more nearly and more dearly? And thus bearing his image like that of a king on a newly minted gold sovereign, in my daily life. Or and you will remember this, am I more like a bronze farthing?

So far I have mainly talked about the need to say 'no' the need to remove and strip out, refine out impurities in our lives and characters but if all we were doing was taking out the negative bits and not replacing them with something else,

then there would not perhaps be much use in that. Imagine someone who never over-eats, never consumes too much alcohol, never has lustful thoughts or watches pornography, never loses their temper, is never boastful maybe even gives all they have to the poor but at the same time they are a joyless, judgmental and separated out Christian living at a distance from the world less some for the dirt in the world rub off on them. That was of course how the purity Christians, or Puritans were regarded and where we get our word 'puritanical' from. A kind of joyless, mean-spirited, pleasure-killing religion. The Pharisees had a similar reputation.

Someone once said we are all against sin, but it is not enough to be just against sin. We have to be for something too.

We see this in the short passage in Titus that is our reading but also throughout the new Testament where there is push as well as a pull. There is stepping forward as well as a stepping back. There is isolation from the world and there is full engagement in doing good.e

Paul reminds Titus that he and his people are to say *No* to *ungodliness and worldly passions*, but say *yes* to self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, eager to do what is good.

That phrase 'do what is good' is used four times in this brief letter to Titus

- *Titus In everything you are to set your church an example by doing what is good. In your teaching show integrity,*
- Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good,
- Those who have trusted in God must be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good.

So we to be ready and eager to what is good. This is the other half of the coin of our lives. On the side we renounce evil and on the other side we embrace what is good by doing what is good, what is uplifting, what builds others up, which relieves

distress, which helps build strong communities, which prays regularly for others which shows kindness, compassion, generosity, faithfulness, peaceableness, to all and sundry. And many, many other things.

As I draw to a close, I am going to read a description of a Christian community from the early third century. The description comes from a lawyer turned defender of the Christian faith called Tertullian who was a prolific writer. One of his books was a defence of Christianity and the Christian way of life which was addressed to the Roman magistrates at a time when Christians were maliciously and wrongly accused of all sorts of abuses. He writes:

We Christians meet together for the reading of Holy Scripture and we take such lessons out of them as we judge suit best with the condition of the times, And certainly our spiritual life is wonderfully nourished with reading the Holy Scriptures, our hopes thereby are built up, and our trust fixed and settled upon God.

The kind of treasury we have is not filled with any dishonourable sum of money but rather everyone puts a little to the public stock, commonly once a month, or when he pleases, and only upon condition that he is both willing and able; for there is no compulsion upon any. All here is a free-will offering, and all these collections are deposited in a common bank for charitable uses, not for the support of merry meetings, for drinking and gluttony, but for feeding the poor and burying the dead, and providing for girls and boys who have neither parents nor provisions left to support them, for

relieving old people worn out in the service of the saints, or those who have suffered by shipwreck, or are condemned to the mines, or islands, or prisons, only for the faith of Christ; We Christians look upon ourselves as one body, informed as it were by one soul; and being thus incorporated by love, we can never dispute what we are to bestow upon our own members. Accordingly among us all things are in common, excepting wives

All sorts of things were said about what happened at Holy Communion – that babies were killed and eaten for example. Tertullian explains what they really do.

The nature of this supper we eat together, you may understand by its name; for it is the Greek word for love - agape ... nothing unclean, has ever admittance here; our souls ascend in prayer to God before we sit down to meat; we eat only what suffices nature, and drink no more than what is strictly becoming chaste and regular persons. We drink as servants that know we must wake in the night to the service of our Master, and discourse as those who remember that they are in the hearing of God. When our supper is ended, and we have washed our hands, and the candles are lighted up, everyone is invited forth to sing praises to God, either such as he collects from the Holy Scriptures, or such as are of his own composing ; and by this you may judge of the measures of drinking at a Christian feast. And as we began, so we conclude all in prayer, and depart not like a parcel of heated bullies, scouring the streets and killing and ravishing the next we meet, but with the same tenor of temperance and modesty we came

Well there are some features in that description which I think would describe us and I doubt very much if any will go from here *'like a parcel of heated bullies killing and ravishing whomsoever we meet'*

The point is their lives as Christians did not just avoid the excesses and practices of their culture but set an example of upright living filled with doing good. Purity Plus if you like.

May we be Christians and a church that says no all that spoils the image of God in us and yes to anything that is good and valuable and worthy and beautiful. May we be changed from one degree of gold into another and better degree through the working out of our salvation and the grace of God at work in us.