

St Mary's Maldon, March 2nd, 2020, Lent 2 **Wrath and Mercy**

Listen to today's paradox. On the one hand, 'the Law brings wrath', and on the other, 'God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world but that the world should be saved through him.'

All this is so important and so difficult to explain. I think I had better try to tell you about myself. But when I tell you about myself, I want you to think not about me but about you. What in your life is the place of anger, condemnation, and on the other hand, of mercy?

I am nearly 70. I have had plenty of time to make a complete mess of things. And I have made quite a mess of some of them. Now, my very dear friend, John Pugh, doesn't believe me. Because I am a priest, I can't have made a mess of anything. And furthermore, I know everything there is to be known about God. I know, just as nobody else in this church knows except, presumably, John Dickens, Stan and Elspeth, how God can love every single person in the world at once. But nobody else understands this. And somebody else thinks, I can't remember who it is, I can see through them, especially all their sins. When I am looking at them, I am looking at their sins

From the inside of my head, it feels completely different. My life has been more or less great, and more or less a mess, all at once, and some of the mess has been of my own making and some not. It wasn't my fault that someone came up to me on my first day of school and pushed me into a puddle because he hated my older brother. It wasn't my fault that on my second day of school, I was slipped because I hadn't read a notice on my first day of school telling me I was meant to do something when I didn't even know where the notice board was. But the prefect in question was on his first day as a prefect with the power to slipper people, and if you have that power you need to exercise it. But it was my fault that a few years later I made an anonymous phone call to the police telling them to raid the prefects' party for drugs.

In fact, what was our fault and what wasn't is such a tangle. I wouldn't have waged guerrilla war against the prefects if they weren't allowed to use canes. And maybe if I hadn't been shouted at from day one, I wouldn't have been such a quarrelsome little boy.

Now, I expect that many, if not all of you, are highly aware of anger, scorn, condemnation and wrath in the world around you. I wonder if you understand what St Paul meant when he said, 'The Law brings wrath.' It's the rules themselves that makes us break the rules, even though the rules are essential. If there weren't any rules there wouldn't have been any anger. That is what St Paul is saying. Now we know that that isn't quite true, but it really has got truth in it. If you could do what you like there would be no temptation.

But let me tell you who I really find scary. It's the good people, the ones who seem to keep the rules effortlessly, who apparently have done nothing wrong. Because, I suppose, they are in a position to condemn the rest of us. Now, I have gone through periods in my life when I have tried hard to keep the rules. And I still do. Don't get me wrong. I do think it's important to try. But St Paul noticed that being good at keeping the rules just makes people proud. Pride and superiority are afflictions that are almost impossible to remove. The only

way out of pride for the proud person – and that may be all of us to some degree – is to make a total mess of things, and in the midst of the mess, to strangely discover that there is someone there who loves us. It might be a human being; it might even be your dog; but ultimately, it's a merciful God at the heart of everything. But sadly, there are people who are so good at being good that they never discover this

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound/
that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now
I'm found, was blind but now I see.

Tw'as grace that taught my heart to fear/
and grace my fear relieved/
how precious did that
grace appear/
the hour I first believed.

Being good cannot save us. Because being good is fouled up by pride. Only mercy can save us in the mess. Mercy can even make the mess glorious, even some time hilarious. It was the mess of my life – I would say the redeemed mess, if that makes any sense, that made me really enjoy working with prisoners in Bulwood Hall. You may find this hard to believe, but in prison, I met people like me, and we loved one another. Any skill I have as a pastor is because I am really good at messing up. If I hadn't messed up I shouldn't have been a priest.

And this was the great breakthrough for St Paul, when he met Jesus crucified and risen on the Damascus Road, when he fell from his horse and was blinded. He was saved from the awful burden of being right, of being able to see, of being the one who knows everything, from the awful burden of being good. He fell from his horse, blind, into the arms not of goodness as he had previously understood it, but of mercy; the mercy of the wounded, crucified and risen saviour, Our Lord Jesus Christ.

He fell into the world where nobody is condemned or judged:

'There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus', he later wrote.

He had discovered what joy meant, in his own words, apart from the righteousness of the law.

All you thoroughly bad people, welcome to the table of the Lord. Amen.