

Sermon preached at St James's Piccadilly London | sjp.org.uk
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rummaging around for purity of heart

You cannot rummage for very long around Christianity or other faith traditions without coming across ideas about purity and defilement. Clean vs. unclean. They are referred to in today's readings and also mentioned in the Collect [the opening prayer for this Sunday].

Purity is generally taken to mean freedom from contamination. A good thing for drinking water and food, and a good thing, too, for our hearts and minds.

Our (Christian) tradition has at times magnificently muddled this simple and essential aspiration, creating a heck of a lot of guilt and grief along the way, and causing harm and distress to its sons and daughters across the centuries. I'm not thinking only of the way in which ideas of purity and defilement have been applied to sex and desire and all the other 'down there' stuff, but also the way in which shame, that most corrosive, disguised and crippling emotion, has been fed by too much of a black and white approach to this.

We are, after all, complicated, conflicted life forms, as much shaped and driven by our evolutionary biology as by any supernatural claims. Only the other day (in evolutionary terms) we were sea and land creatures, fighting for our food, watching out for predators, driven to breed mechanistically and entirely dependent on our fight or flight responses for day-to-day survival.

Some of that may sound true of today – of aggressive corporate life perhaps. And it is the stuff of what passes very often for popular drama and entertainment.

Anything that describes human maturity, restraint, gentleness and integration seems less likely to be chosen for study or story. All insufficiently edgy maybe. Yet we remain a strange mix of the undeveloped creatures of our evolutionary past and the self-aware humans of our 21st century.

That mix is indeed a strange one, as I hope you might agree from your knowledge of yourself and those you observe. We can be overwhelmed by impulses of kindness and care towards others at one moment, and filled with explosive rage at another. We can handle rebuff or disdain one day, and be completely destroyed by actual or imagined rejection or denigration the next.

If you recognise yourself in these things, then welcome to the human family. For sure, there are people at very different places on that spectrum, and if we have been around enough and attended to observing ourselves clearly enough, we'll know that change is possible. At our best we find we can relinquish the controlling stake in ourselves that makes us quick to take offence, quick to hit back, quick to be in full control, quick to find fault in other human bipeds.

Sometimes this maturing comes to us by the simple passage of time (but not always); sometimes it is found – miraculously, wonderfully – in younger people (but not always). Sometimes a major crisis moves us toward a greater simplicity and purity in our thinking and feeling; sometimes a major crisis does the opposite.

Sometimes the experience of reciprocated love or of time-tested un-grabbing friendship nurtures us to such an extent that we

surprisingly find ourselves to be better people, in all sorts of ways, as a result. Purer in the best way. It is always a cause of the deepest gratitude to know, or have known, the sheer gift and miraculous power of loving and being loved.

Anyone who tells you they have the knowledge about humans to change you for the better and rid you of conflicts and impurities via their book, course, ideology, insight, party, cause, church or pay-per-view online video series is quite probably insane and best avoided. Some of them make a mountain of dosh because we remain suckers, and easy prey to such claims. Don't feel too bad about that. Who amongst us, deep down and from time-to-time, does not feel pretty contaminated by our ambiguities and conflicts, our bruises and repeated destructive patterns, our pathetic muddledness? We want a cure. We want it *now*, please.

I have known some periods of acute distress and have sought help. I encountered sellers of fake potions, salesmen of both sexes and (thank God) some angels in disguise who patched me up. We need our wits about us.

What then might be said to 21st century adventurers who engage with Christianity as part of their taking life – and their lives – seriously?

Well, one thing is to point out that purity and its opposite are indeed real dimensions, though rarely in very tightly drawn either/or forms. We are ambiguous creatures. Our motives are rarely totally pure and rarely totally corrupt. As we go adventuring, **self-knowledge** is of huge value to us, and so is a degree of forgiving (or at least accommodating) tolerance of our own ambiguities and conflicts. It helps if we can extend that tolerance to others, too.

Another is that the thing we so inadequately call love turns out to be something very

remarkable, and transformative: a compass, a teacher, a form of knowledge, and a game-changer. It can help us set a right course, it can open our eyes to what counts, it is a way of apprehending and understanding and it is capable of changing our lives. If I say 'inadequately called love' it is because, as we all know, we've blurred the term through the way we use it as a synonym for liking something. That can't be undone any time soon, but internally, imaginatively, spiritually, it is vital we nurture a fuller grasp of what it is to love: how we can serve the world and others by it, and be ourselves changed by it, even by the overwhelming distress of loss and grief that love can lead to.

What else might we want to point to? James in this morning's epistle hints at the place of generosity, and offers some practical advice when he says: "You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger". Best of all maybe, he says "But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers..." These might count as steps towards the kind of purity we should seek and long to find.

And I found myself wondering about other routes towards greater purity as the gospels speak of it. After all, we can test for purity of drinking water, but what would be the equivalent in human terms, of our souls and hearts and minds? That's far more complicated, and absolute purity seems, as noted, unlikely.

But that aside, I found myself thinking about this business of 'being ourselves'. It's a popular idea, and a confused one – used often as shorthand for 'this is me, like it or not' when in fact to truly 'be myself' presupposes the need to *find* myself first (which, by the way, and as you will know, is a key theme in the gospel, which hints that we begin to find our ourselves only by being found first by God).

Could it be that finding ourselves and then seeking to be faithful to that unique, essential identity whilst growing and being open to others and to God is amongst the best ways to achieve greater purity of heart? I think it could.

Purity in this sense is nothing to do with sex and nothing to do with perfection or faultlessness, but with a deep desire to be authentically human before God and in the company of one another. So, crazy ambition, greediness of any kind, addictions of many varieties will get in the way of this. But they can be overcome. It is possible.

Finally, here's a thought not addressed to those 21st century adventurers I mentioned who might be wanting to engage with the Christian claims. Rather it's addressed to those of us already on board (to whatever degree). A great danger for church people is a kind of tameness. Somehow the edginess of the gospel gets lost. The routine takes over. It gets a bit comfortable. Church becomes club. It gets domesticated. *We* get domesticated. Isn't that a kind of contamination – and the opposite of purity of heart? And so I want to commend to you a new vocation: to become *feral*.

Feral means 'having returned to an untamed state from domestication or captivity'. If any of us is serious about God and the gospel, about life and our own lives and the life of this astonishing planet, it might be worth thinking about. Have you become a bit too domesticated? Too domesticated in your thinking, your 'doing', in your expectations, in the way in which you are 'you' – the way in which you inhabit your life?

Don't worry too much; you're not alone in this. But don't let it creep up unawares. Purity in the gospel sense is not about spotlessness, perfect presentability, something rather antiseptic. It is about stripping away the garbage and dross and, standing naked before God, discovering that we in fact are wonderfully clothed and – in the words from Luke about the man once possessed and now free – 'in our right mind'. There: to be clothed and in our right mind and free of the many demons we have taken a lot of trouble to cultivate. Maybe that is the purity we seek. Amen.

Hugh Valentine