

Sermon preached on Sunday May 17 2015

Lessons : Acts : 1: 15-17 ;21 - 26

Gospel : John 17 verses 6 - 19

May the words that I speak and the thoughts of our hearts be acceptable to you O God, our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.

I want to start by telling you about an extraordinary man called Christopher Smart. He was born in 1722 and he lived in London. His life wasn't a very happy one as he suffered from some form of mental disorder - maybe it was schizophrenia. He became well-known in London as he walked around the streets and asked people to pray with him - which some of them did. However one day in St James's Park things came to a head in a public disturbance that he was supposed to have started and as a result of this his father in law had him confined in St Luke's Hospital, Bethnal Green, known as Bedlam, on 6 May, 1757 as a "curable patient". Two famous writers of the time were Dr Samuel Johnson and Dr Charles Burney. Johnson wrote to Burney about Christopher Smart - " I did not think he ought to be shut up. His infirmities were not noxious to society. He insisted on people praying with him, and I'd as lief pray with Kit Smart as anyone else!

Anyway Christopher Smart spent 1757 to 1763 in what was known then as a Mad House, close to St Luke's, Bedlam. He was lucky enough to be able to have his cat called Jeoffrey with him. Smart wrote that he felt in limbo, homeless, in between a public and a private space. He turned inwards and devoted himself to thinking about God. The most famous of his writings is Jubilate Agno - Rejoice in the Lamb - which didn't see the light of day until 1939 when W. F. Stead published it. He had found Smart's writings in a private library. The title Stead gave Rejoice in the Lamb was A song from Bedlam. It's a very long poem all about worshipping God, by all created things and beings, each in its own way. It's become famous since Benjamin Britten set parts of it for choir and organ in the cantata Rejoice in the Lamb - we've performed it here some years ago.

Smart's cat Jeoffrey has become the most famous cat in the whole of English Literature according to Wikipedia as Smart wrote of him:

For I will consider my Cat Jeoffrey. For he is the servant of the Living God, duly and daily serving him - and it goes on at length.

You'll be wondering what on earth all this has got to do with today's readings and our Flower Festival!

Part of Jubilate Agno is a section on Flowers. I'll read it out to you:

For flowers are great blessings

For the flowers have their angels even the words of God's Creation.

For the flower glorifies God and the root parries the adversary.

For there is a language of flowers.

For flowers are peculiarly the poetry of Christ.

It's that last line that has stayed with me ever since I first heard it – that Flowers are the poetry of Christ.

The theme for our flower festival is miracles. When we look at a flower, or flowers together, I consider we are marvelling at a miracle. Just their very being is miraculous – they slowly open, look miraculous and marvellous, and then fade away. We feel a particular sadness as they wither and die, remembering their former glory and there is nothing we can do to stop these miracles from fading away.

Jesus asked us to consider the lilies of the field – how they just ARE and Solomon in all his glory couldn't better them. Christopher Smart saying that flowers are the poetry of Christ puts a different slant on our considerations of flowers as we look around here at all the wonderful arrangements. Miracles are quite a daunting task to translate into a flower arrangement. The creativity and cleverness of these displays is truly amazing!

In our gospel passage from John this morning Jesus is talking to God about the disciples and how he has been preparing them and educating them to carry on what was begun when Jesus became incarnate. Jesus talks about making himself ( and God) Known to us here in the world.

How do we know Jesus?

The disciples knew him by being with him and here Jesus speaks of guarding them and getting them to believe in him and his message. He says: “ I have made your name known to those whom you gave me . Now they know that everything you have given me is from you, for the words that you gave to me I have given to them and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you.” And later on Jesus says: “ I have given them your word. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth”.

We know Jesus by the words passed down since his death and resurrection -including these words from John’s gospel.

These words work in us through the Holy Spirit.

But if we consider words in the form of poetry I think they seem to work in a different way. Poetry consists of words – but something to do with metre, construction, impact, associations, our state of mind and receptivity make words as poetry work in us in different ways from prose words and sentences.

Think of Wordsworth’s poem on Daffodils, or to the Daisy – his words conjure up a picture of the flowers themselves.

But when we look at flowers themselves, something beyond words stirs inside us. How do we use flowers?

We arrange them so we can look at them. We grow them in our gardens and then cut them and put them in vases in our houses. Or we go out and buy flowers to decorate for special occasions – in our

homes and in church – for weddings, for funerals and Flower Festivals.

Funeral flowers speak to us differently. We send them to the bereaved hoping that the flowers will say more to them than our clumsy words in a card, trying to sum up what we feel and can't express.

Francis of Assisi told his followers to go out and preach the gospel and said: " Use words if you have to". Flowers – if we consider them as the poetry of Christ can say so much wordlessly in their miraculous perfection.

Looking at flowers and thinking of them as the poetry of Christ becomes another way of knowing Jesus – a wordless way of knowing him – not even in the form of a poem built from words. I suggest you look at these flowers – or maybe just rest on one in particular and let the thought that you are gazing on the poetry of Christ slowly sink into your being and see what happens. I hope that you will find that the arrangements and the flowers themselves speak to your inner being in a way that nothing else can. Let's continue to enjoy the Flower Festival and consider as we look Christopher Smart's remarkable flash of poetic genius – that flowers are peculiarly the poetry of Christ. Amen