

**DIFFICULT TEACHINGS AND THE PATH TO LIFE**  
**Sermon preached at 10.00am Sung Eucharist**  
**St. Edmundsbury Cathedral**  
**26 August 2018**

Growing up in my family, summer holidays were in campsites around Europe. Caravan and car were hitched together and off we'd go to France or Italy or Germany or Scotland - or one year, because of my brother's appendicitis, to Norfolk. Caravanning holidays included evenings playing games. I remember how upset I got as a 7 year old when I lost Monopoly. Learning to lose is a hard lesson. Now my children are bemused that I avoid playing board games. This year one of them asked outright, "Dad, why don't you like playing?" There was a long pause. The question was difficult for me. I don't like playing games because I don't like losing. And that is hard to admit.

This morning's Gospel reading tells of people finding Jesus words difficult. <sup>1</sup> Last week, Joe spoke about how shocking Jesus' words would have been to those who heard him speaking about eating his flesh and drinking his blood. This morning we have heard of people turning back, no longer going about with Jesus because his teaching was too difficult.

We encounter difficult teachings regularly. Some are difficult personally – like learning to lose. Some are difficult communally, as a church or in our society. Often they are difficult because they challenge our beliefs and they rub against our tendency to presume the universe revolves around me. Challenging though they are, we are invited to hear and accept and grow.

You may have seen in the news this week a story that is typical of our time. A social media storm erupted around Paris Jackson, the daughter of Michael Jackson. This caught my eye because I have long been a fan of Michael Jackson, the King of Pop! Paris Jackson is a model and recently she appeared on the cover of famous magazine in Singapore. This made the news because of Singapore's various draconian laws. Paris Jackson was accused of putting her career before human rights. <sup>2</sup> The social media storm as usual was a whirl of critical accusations on the one hand, and expressions of support on the other. Amidst all that, there was one comment that stood out. One supporter posted "No one can define you or your truth. Remember that."

"No one can define you or your truth." It is the great myth of our time: the idea that I am free to be whomever I choose. It is the great myth of our time – and it is nonsense. Our faith tradition teaches that it is nonsense. Which is a difficult teaching for our society – and for us, defined as we are, by our society's norms. It is nonsense because no man or woman is an island. We are defined by our family, our upbringing, our culture, our fragility, our mortality and so on. I may reject my family, my upbringing, my culture, but they are always part of who I am. Truth is not something which each of us makes up. Truth is greater than the individual.

I understand the sentiment. The norms of society and cultural expectations can trap and oppress people. Its good news that our own society has seen huge changes in our lifetimes. Think of the hard-won changes for women. These changes show truth is greater than cultural norms. But the idea that we each have our own individual truth which we are free to choose is an illusion.

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<sup>1</sup> John 6

<sup>2</sup> Paris, a bisexual woman, on the cover of a magazine in Singapore where gay sex is illegal.

Another example was a conversation I had after a wedding here last weekend. I chatted with one of the guests about her faith. At one point she said “it’s my God and it’s up to me how I express that”. Freedom of religion is essential, of course. But I got the sense that she was taking about an individualistic view of God. To be fair, it sounded like she came from an overbearing Christian tradition. But it reminded me of the saying “you can tell when you have made God in your own image because God always agrees with you”.

Fundamental to the Gospel of John, is the truth that reality is shaped by the self-giving, mutually-defining Trinity of God. This is a difficult teaching for us so convinced of our independent, objective selves. It is a difficult teaching for us shaped by a society that preaches individual truth. We are blessed by those who show us another way. Edith Stein was a nun who died in Auschwitz. She is remembered by the church at the beginning of August. Jewish by race, Edith became a Christian as a young woman. She taught philosophy across Europe until the Nazi’s stopped her teaching. She then became a Carmelite nun. With the Nazi threat growing in Germany, Edith was moved to a convent in Holland. But after the Dutch Bishops condemned anti-Semitism, Edith and other Jewish people were rounded up and sent to Auschwitz.

Edith taught that to discovery of our true identity, our true self, is to discover our place in the Trinitarian self-expression and self-giving. Edith showed this through her compassion for people targeted by the Nazis and people alongside her in Auschwitz. A hellish place where humanity and individuality were denied. Yet Edith demonstrated how, through surrender to God and co-suffering with others, we discover who we really are – and we can radiate to others the divine love that fills us.

The dramatic example of Edith Stein catches the attention. But we can observe the same truth all around us. On Wednesday the town was full of people for market day. I noticed the number of people accompanied by carers, people living with sickness or disability, assisted by another person. The public displays of care were deeply moving. "No one can define you or your truth" may be the myth of our day. But for many people, reality is shaped by the compassion and love of others.

One more observation about these difficult teachings. A recent series on Radio 4 explored happiness<sup>3</sup> – what makes for a happy, fulfilling life. This included an interview with a woman in London who is a Thai kick-boxing world champion. Her next goal is to be a world champion in regular boxing. She and her coached explained the motivation for striving to be a double world champion. They are dedicated to raising awareness of the achievements of women in sport. They said the motivation is not guilt, but a desire to make difference.

The motivation is not guilt. As Christians, our church language and our theology is full of guilt-inducing words and images. But God is not interested in making us feel guilty. God is interested in us finding life and living abundantly. Jesus doesn’t give us difficult teachings to undermine us or leave us feeling inadequate. Jesus guides us to living water, to verdant pastures, to life in abundance. At times that is painful. But as Simon Peter puts it, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.”<sup>4</sup>

Interestingly and encouragingly, the final programme in Radio 4’s happiness series focused on happiness as altruism. They focused on love in action. Much of the programme was about a dementia care group. The interviewer observed how intimately connected the person with dementia and the carer can be. One carer spoke about losing yourself in the other person. Not the private, lonely self of rampant individualism. But the communal self, shaped by

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<sup>3</sup> “Hacking Happiness”, Radio 4

<sup>4</sup> John 6.68

interrelations with others. It is the difficult teaching at the heart of our faith: the way to find life is to let go of the separate self.

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