

Trinity College Cambridge
Sunday 10 February 2013

THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS – SLOTH
Genesis 9: 18–28 Matthew 25: 13–30

The Revd Philip North

I thought about illustrating my theme by telling you that I was too slothful to bother to write a sermon. That way we could all get straight on with the drinks. But instead I am going to do something that will get me into even deeper trouble. I feel sure that I am going to be thrown out of Trinity without any supper, because tonight I am going to invite you all to join in with some sin. You might expect a preacher to strengthen your moral resolve and encourage you in the battle with wrongdoing, but tonight and I am going to urge you to sin and to sin boldly.

Let me try and explain what I mean with a story. Like many urban dwellers I am a keen outdoor walker and a few months ago I was walking in the Yorkshire Dales with my two sisters. I was marching out in front with map and compass, the very picture of boy-scout enthusiasm, walking briskly, eyes in front of me, keeping the pace up and keen to get there as quickly and efficiently as possible. My sisters, though, adopted a very different strategy. They kept stopping – sometimes to gaze at an orchid, sometimes to admire the view or look at the sky, sometimes to observe the flight of swallows or the gooey trail of a black slug. It took them ages to get to the pub, but when we shared stories of the day it was clear that the experience that my sisters had enjoyed was infinitely richer and more varied and wonderful than my own. I may have impressed with speed and drive and energy expenditure. But it was the sisters who had really delighted in the walk.

My problem that day was one that many people share – a captivity to a driven and rather joyless activism. I was so desperate to achieve a task as efficiently and speedily as possible that I missed the point of the day. My sisters, who were slow and slothful, were the ones who understood.

And yet so many lives today are dominated by that kind of manic activism, a desperate desire to achieve as much as possible as speedily as they can. In the workplace, staff members are placed under tremendous pressure to account for every second of the day and fill each moment with meaningful labour. In the north east I knew many people who worked in call centres where every single moment they spent away from the phones – even to go the lavatory – had to be recorded and explained. The ubiquity of the mobile device and the smartphone means that even small gaps in the day are now filled up with the ceaseless checking and sending of email as work invades more and more aspects of our lives. And it is not just our work. Our moments of leisure can be every bit as driven and activist. I look after a Parish in Camden Town which is a lively part of London with an

intense night life, and each Sunday morning as I walk to church, in a wonderful cultural clash, I meet people coming the other way who are just returning home from the clubs. They were meant to be out enjoying themselves, but with their sallow skin, blood-shot eyes and the all-pervading aroma of kebab fat and cannabis, they look utterly awful. Our leisure is fast becoming as frenetic and as driven and as joyless as our work. At every moment of every day we are pushing ourselves manically on to the next thing, trying to cram as much experience and achievement as possible into every second. The one thing we must never do is stop, for that is a pathetic sign of weakness.

And the result of this driven activism? It is deadly. Our imaginations are suppressed, our capacity for wonder is buried. We strip out of our lives precious time to think, to reflect, to pray, to be. As a culture we are becoming so driven that we are missing out on much of what gives life purpose and joy. So tonight I want to urge you to sin. I want to plead with you to foster in your lives a habit of godly slothfulness. I want you to be lazy for Jesus.

There is, of course, a *godless* slothfulness which is properly sinful, and I am certainly not encouraging that. Sin is anything that does damage to our relationship with God, and the wrong sort of slothfulness can damage that relationship very seriously. Our second reading this evening showed an example of that. In the parable of the talents the Master gives three servants a share of his wealth before going off on a trip. Two of the servants do splendidly. They work hard, they engage in fruitful capitalist endeavour and when the Master returns he is delighted that they have doubled the money they were given. But when it comes to the third servant it's a rather different story. He is lazy and fearful and simply buries the talent in the ground so that it is at least safe. The Master is furious and casts the worthless servant into outer darkness. And the reason for his anger is not hard to see. The third servant has squandered his potential. He has wasted the gifts he has been given. He demonstrates for us the sinful, godless slothfulness that we need to avoid which is all about wasting the gifts God has given us, squandering our talents, throwing away opportunity, preferring indolence to a life lived to the full.

But there is more to God's gifts than work or activity or economic self-justification. Amongst the most precious of God's gift to us are the capacity for wonder, imagination, a delight in the created world, a joy in human relationship, the instinctive lure of prayer. These too are God's gifts, and to squander these through misplaced activism is equally a sin, equally a denial of what God calls us to be. Yesterday the church kept the feast of St Scholastica, a woman who, with her brother Benedict, was one of the founders of the western Monastic tradition. Part of the aim of the rule they developed was the desire for balance in our lives. The monastic day combines in its routines time to pray, time to work and time for leisure, and if one of these gets out of kilter and starts dominating too much of our time, something of our human potential is lost. The Christian faith is not simply about intellectual belief or creeds or moral codes. It is about the flourishing of every single aspect of our lives, about life lived in all its fullness.

To be fully alive, we need to spend time delighting in the company of friends and family and enjoying relationships with the people we love, relaxing at the table rather than getting straight on with the washing up. We need to stop from time to time and gaze at the night sky or in some other way wonder at the power and beauty of the created world. We need to read widely – Hello Magazine as well as Dostoyevsky. We need to spend time looking properly at art and architecture and use such achievements to reflect on our own lives. We need to sit back and listen intently to music, giving it all our attention and not trying to work or type or text or watch at the same time. We need to make space for silence. And above all we need time to pray so that we can allow God to touch our lives and change us into the people he wants us to be. A balanced life resists the temptation of driven activism and makes time for such things as these. Indeed not doing so is as much a denial of God's gifts to us as the feckless indolence of the third servant. It is a balanced life with time for godly slothfulness that brings us fully to life. It means we can celebrate all God's gifts. It enables the formation of whole and rounded character. And whilst doubtless Michael Gove would not preach a sermon quite like this one, actually it makes us much more effective as students or workers or parents or leaders.

My nephew is twelve years old, and last summer he was all lined up for an incredibly busy holiday with endless trips and visits to friends and days out. However, when confronted with such a full diary, he looked a little crestfallen. 'But I haven't got any time to think!' he pleaded. Adam loves to spend a bit of time each day just thinking. He will lie on his bed or on the grass in the garden and think. To begin with it drove my sister mad. She thought he was just wasting his time in ways that could have been better used by cleaning his bedroom or polishing his shoes or conjugating Latin verbs. But actually we all need time to stop and think. We need time to wonder, to delight, to imagine, to pray, to be. We need moments of godly slothfulness, for without that an essential part of our humanity is wasted and the best of God's gifts to us are squandered. So be slothful. Sin boldly.

Amen.