

Trinity College Chapel

1<sup>st</sup> of Epiphany (BCP Evensong)

3/2/08

+In Nomine

Once upon a time there was an old king, who had three daughters. The first two were hard-hearted and grasping, but the youngest was beautiful and true, and loved her father. The king decided to divide his kingdom between the three daughters provided that, in public, they would declare their love for him. This the first two daughters did readily, though without meaning it. But the third daughter would not make a public performance of her private feelings. She refused to announce her love for her father just for the benefit of the listening ears of the court. So her father the king became very angry. He disowned her, deprived her of her inheritance and cast her out. And thus began a great tale of woe; a story of parental madness and blindness; of the deceits of loveless children, of the sufferings of loving ones; of civil war in a once unified kingdom.

The story I have summarised is, of course, the story of *King Lear*. It is a devastating story about recognition – or rather the failure to recognise. It is about people not seeing properly, and about others deliberately trying not to be seen. It is therefore about something profound in the human condition: our failure to acknowledge each other truly and lovingly, and our tendency to hide from one another (and also, perhaps, from God; hiding was, after all, the second great sin in the Garden of Eden after the eating of the apple).

Those of you who know the play well may remember that it is full of imagery about eyes and about looking. One of its most famous scenes contains the shocking moment in which Gloucester's eyes are put out at the instigation of Lear's two evil daughters, Regan and Goneril. Gloucester in his blindness then stumbles across the countryside towards Dover, unable even to recognise his own son Edgar, who accompanies him disguised as a mad beggar. And in this condition of blindness he mirrors Lear himself, who in his madness is also apparently unable to recognise those around him. These failures of recognition are in many ways simply the consequences of early, wilful denials of recognition: Lear's and Gloucester's respective withdrawal of parental recognition and

love from their faithful children. So what unfolds before us in *King Lear* is a world of estrangement and misrecognition – a world in which parents and children are alienated from one another, as well as brother being alienated from brother and sister from sister. It is a world, too, in which parents do not trust the love of their children. This is just the case with Lear in the opening scene. He tries instead to test that love publicly, and give it a contractual form – and it is desperately difficult to watch that scene, as the confused Cordelia finds her father trying to force their customary intimacy into artificial public forms. Though superficially speaking to her, he is really speaking to the court:

Now, our joy . . .  
Strive to be of interest; what can you say to draw  
A third more opulent than your sisters? Speak. (I, i, 82, 85-86)

Her words, meanwhile, are directed to no-one but him: she is trying to get him to see her as she is, as his daughter, standing before him – as the one who also sees him as *he* is. He wants a public recognition of the fact that he is loved; he wants love on parade. She wants a private recognition of who he and she really are – she asks to be recognised for the person who loves him without ceremony or show. Her silent appeal to him is: don't force me to do this. 'I cannot heave my heart into my mouth.' (I, i, 91-92) Lear has shamefully backed himself into a corner. When Cordelia will not give him what he wants – a display which enables him 'to *look* like a loved man'<sup>1</sup> – but rather continues to offer him in silence what has always been his if he only recognised it (namely, a genuine love), he refuses to accept what is offered. He does not reciprocate her truthful, loving acknowledgement of him; he does not *want* such a love; cannot trust it; wants it to have some other basis. So he banishes her from his sight. He makes himself blind to her and her invisible to him. He will not look on her any more. He puts an end to their physical presence to one another, this being the logical outworking of his denial of that higher presence which has already gone by the board: their presence to one another in mutual, loving trust.

The weight of imagery about eyes and looking in *King Lear* ties in with these dark themes of misrecognition and the breakdown of true and loving reciprocity between people. The power of the eyes for good – their capacity to establish mutuality, to look with tenderness, insight, and compassion, to meet and return the gaze of other people – this power is denied by much of what is said and done in the play. As Stanley Cavell says,

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<sup>1</sup> Cavell, p.290.

many of the acts of vision the play names are those of 'giving *looks* and of *staring*': acts of vision which are designed 'exactly *not* to express feeling, or else to express cruel feeling'. The 'power of the eyes to see is used in isolation from their capacity to weep'.<sup>2</sup> And the doers of bad things in the play persistently (with various degrees of violence) seek *not to be looked at*. They cannot bear it. They do not want to be recognised for who they are. Terror of being looked at leads them to send people far away, or to physically tear out their eyes. In such acts, they 'literalise evil's ancient love of darkness'.<sup>3</sup> Even a mostly good character, like Gloucester's disowned son Edgar, tries for a long time to avoid his father's recognition. His father did not 'trust his love',<sup>4</sup> and now he does not trust his father's. He fails his father as his father failed him. And so they travel along together, hiding from one another all the while. Only very near the end of the play, when deriving a different security from elsewhere, when fully clad in armour, when bolstered by a public role once more, only then does Edgar feel safe enough to 'give his father vision again, and bear his recognition'. But by then it is nearly too late; the old man has 'all but seeped away'.<sup>5</sup>

*King Lear* can put us in mind of another story – a biblical one this time – and that is the story of Joseph and his brothers in Genesis, which we had as our first reading. Joseph's brothers, who think he is dead, do not recognise him when they go to him in Egypt begging for his help to keep them from starvation. *He* recognises *them*, but does not trust their love quite yet, and so hides his true identity from them. He acts angrily towards them, in a way that is quite startling. He accuses them of being 'spies' four or five times. The passage goes like this:

When Joseph saw his brothers, he recognised them, but he treated them like strangers and spoke harshly to them. 'Where do you come from?' he said. They said, 'From the land of Canaan, to buy food.' Although Joseph had recognised his brothers, they did not recognise him. . . . He said to them 'You are spies; you have come to see the nakedness of the land.' . . . And he put them all together in prison for three days. (Gen 42:7-8, 9b, 17)

Joseph is not ready to let them see him yet. He knows them, but will not acknowledge them, because in acknowledging them he will have to allow them to know *him*. It is interesting that he makes such a meal of their being spies, because of course spies are people who look at others without being looked at themselves. Spies are hidden people,

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<sup>2</sup> Cavell, p.273.

<sup>3</sup> Cavell, p.275.

<sup>4</sup> Cavell, p.284.

<sup>5</sup> Cavell, p.285.

people who avoid acknowledgement. Spies seek an intimacy that requires no reciprocity. But it is Joseph, at this stage, who is spying: spying on his brothers to see if they are reformed enough for him to give himself back to them again safely; spying to see if they are honest men. His is therefore a careful, one-way sort of looking. But we know, too, that there is hope for the return of a truer reciprocity and a truer intimacy by the fact that Joseph also uses his eyes to weep. 'He turned away from them and wept.' (v. 24) This gives us hope that he will not hide himself permanently from them; that he will not avoid the possibility of love forever; that sometime soon he will also turn *towards* them and weep, and look at them as their brother, and let them look at him with the same redemptive recognition.

We might let this provoke us to meditate on the ways we avoid love; all the ways we avoid letting others recognise and love us. It is worth thinking about all the careful, one-way looking which many of us do for much of the time, because few of us dare trust others to love us for who we are. We want to be that little bit surer of them. The stories I have told so far tonight have been stories about shame and lack of trust; lack of trust because we do not believe the love of others, and shame because we do not believe in our own lovability. We are intensely vulnerable in these ways. We try to give people reasons to love us; we try to secure love with contractual forms; we try to test love before we risk ourselves with it. We are very like Lear, who when Gloucester exclaims, 'O! let me kiss your hand', replies so poignantly, 'Let me wipe it first: it smells of mortality' (IV, *vi*, 131-32). Mortality, he thinks ('the hand without rings of power on it'<sup>6</sup>) cannot be loveable. 'He cannot bear love when he has no reason to be loved, perhaps because of the helplessness, the passiveness which that implies, which some take for impotence.'<sup>7</sup> Perhaps that is what led him to deny Cordelia in the first place. Or we are like Edgar, who does not dare tell his father who he is until he is superficially protected by armour, and his father is virtually dead.

How we long to speak the truth about ourselves, to be loved for ourselves, and yet how we fear it. What lengths we will go to to avoid other people's eyes, when actually what we most need is to be looked at with love and with understanding. Our lives are full of hiding, and of one-way looking: of spying, in fact, or of peeping out from behind

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<sup>6</sup> Cavell, p.289.

<sup>7</sup> Cavell, p.289.

armour. This is true of our behaviour in a small way even when (as so often) we see someone we know coming towards us on the street, or shopping in the supermarket, and we do not know whether to look at them or to pretend we have not seen them: do we meet their eye and hope for mutual recognition or not? How often we look away, and avoid the risk of contact because it is easier to do so, and makes us less vulnerable. But there are much more important examples too. How often we are incapacitated by our insecurities and the things that make us ashamed of ourselves – and so try to avoid being looked at, because we think we will not or cannot be looked at in love. People are *mortified* by things which to another person seem wholly unimportant: ‘one’s origins, one’s accent, one’s ignorance, one’s skin, one’s clothes, one’s legs or teeth . . .’ These are some of ‘the most isolating of feelings’,<sup>8</sup> and extremely hard to explain or communicate to others – though we all have things that make us ashamed. And we do not only feel shame about our own actions and being, we feel it about ‘the actions and being of those with whom we are identified’: fathers, daughters, brothers and sisters – ‘the beings whose self-revelations reveal oneself.’<sup>9</sup> Families, indeed ‘any objects of one’s love and commitment, ought to be the places where shame is overcome’, but they are also (as *King Lear* so brilliantly shows) ‘the place of its deepest manufacture’, and we are then ‘hostage’ to shame’s power, or ‘fugitive’ from it.<sup>10</sup>

Christians, I think, often also feel shame about the Church to which they belong, or about belonging to a Church at all.

The curtain is just coming down on the season of Epiphany, in which we have remembered some of the first ‘seeings’ of Jesus, beginning with the Magi, who trekked far across a wilderness to their defining moment of encounter with Jesus. And when they found him, they had the Light of the World manifested to them; a Light disclosed for the eyes of Gentiles as well as Jews. From those showings at the beginning of Jesus’s life there follows a whole series of encounters in the Gospel stories – some leading to recognition and some not. Some, like the Pharisee Nicodemus, could not take this step into the light easily or immediately. Others who followed Jesus could. They took greater risks, and came into Jesus’s presence in full view of others. We might think of Mary of Bethany, who anointed Jesus’s feet and kissed them. She risked returning his gaze, under

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<sup>8</sup> Cavell, p.286.

<sup>9</sup> Cavell, p.286.

<sup>10</sup> Cavell, p.286.

the watching eyes of others. She was one of those in the Gospels who trusted that they might actually be loved, despite all their many weaknesses and faults, and even though they could not be a hundred percent sure of it beforehand. They did not put Jesus's love to the test. They did not hide. They took a chance on their own lovability.

The liberation that followed – which is the liberation of the Christian Gospel – is that they did not take that chance in vain. Jesus looked with love on Mary, the fragrance of whose holy love for him filled the whole house. For she had done a beautiful thing. She had taken the risk of making herself known. In displaying her allegiance to Jesus, and her love for him, and her belief in him, she had uncovered something about herself that made her vulnerable to misrecognition and criticism. In giving recognition to him she revealed herself, just as Peter did when he said, 'You are the Christ', and Thomas when he said, 'My Lord and my God!'. They came out of hiding.

That they did not take that chance in vain is confirmed by Jesus's whole life, and at the end of it by his death on the cross. The cross is a total, unconditional act of love in which nothing is held back. Jesus gives his very self in love: 'this is my body, given for you; this is the new covenant in my blood, poured out for you'. And he makes this gift of love with what the New Testament calls *eagerness*: a passionate desire to be in a reciprocal relation with us; to be intimate. This is true love, and it comes to lift our shame from us, to draw us out of the places where we hide from one another and from God, encouraging us not to keep back our most important words of love until it is too late. Jesus in his life and in his death speaks a beautiful trust in his fallible and fragile disciples, and continues to speak it now to those who are every bit as frail.