

The Grace of God *OR* the world of the West?

May the words of my lips and the meditations of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer.

1. Introduction

My first really significant encounter with worldwide Anglicanism came at theological college. It was 1990 and an east African priest was on secondment with us. He preached in the college chapel. He posed a question. Which gospel, he asked, which gospel do you westerners want us to believe? The one you came with or the one you preach now? Which gospel? I was horrified, not because what he said was not true. I was horrified because it was true.

My east African brother's question has nagged away at me ever since. But how has it come about that we have a different gospel now from the one we first preached. What is this difference between what we westerners say now and what we said then?

I think the difference is nothing less than the grace of God and what we mean by it. The difference comes from the way that western culture and the western church deny or distort God's grace. The modern west, in both culture and church, is, overall, graceless, and has become so because of its worldliness. That is why I have called this plenary talk the grace of God *or* the world of the west. Ultimately you cannot have both. It is either/or. My prayer is that as global Anglicans we choose grace, not the world of the west. For those of us who have tried to have grace and the world, I pray for our repentance. My fear is as global Anglicans we will try to have grace AND the world, and that God justly hands us over to the consequences of our sin in rejecting his grace as it truly is and builds his kingdom through others.

But I must now explain why grace is at stake, why the culture of the west denies grace and how the western church distorts grace.

2. Why is Grace at stake?

Let me begin with grace

On first hearing you may well be thinking that I am simply crazy. People in the western church still talk about grace. They talk about it a lot. If anything the charge is that traditional believers like me lack grace. So what am I getting at? It's this. It's not enough just to say the word 'grace' a lot. The issue is what we mean by it, and whether we mean what the bible means or whether we have made up our own meaning for ourselves.

2.1. Cheap Grace?

Now the kind of grace that I think the western church talks about, and come to that western culture when it thinks about grace at all is this: cheap grace. Cheap grace. I am borrowing from the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He says this.

"Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession.... Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate"¹

We especially need to note three points.

- This grace is *worldly*. Bonhoeffer means that it conforms to the patterns of the world, is no different from the world and listens to the world.² Crucial.

Bonhoeffer was warning us about mixing Christian grace with the world's

¹ *The Cost of Discipleship* London. SCM 1963:47

² *The Cost of Discipleship* London. SCM 1963:46 -47

idea of grace, and at worst substituting the world's view of grace for the Christian view. For Bonhoeffer, who was writing in the 1930s, that influence from the world came from the tragic infatuation of some German Christians with Nazism. The precise kind of worldliness may be different now from Nazism then. I'm not saying that modern western culture and the modern western church is pro -Nazi. I am saying it is pro -world, just as, in their different way, Nazi Christians tried to be.

This worldliness is at the heart of Bonhoeffer's criticism. He is echoing the Barmen declaration of 1934, when German Confessing Christians rejected the idea that Christ's people should listen to any other voice claiming to stand on a par with his. The Barmen declaration comes back to that time and again: the imperative that Christ's people listen to him the good Shepherd and not to any competing voice. It is Christ alone, not Christ and something else.... Whether the something else is Nazism or liberal democracy or an understandable pride in establishing oneself as an independent country.

But what does this cheap grace that conforms to the world look like?

Bonhoeffer points especially to 2 things that mark out cheap grace from real grace.

- This grace is *repentanceless*
- This is a grace we *bestow on ourselves*, in other words, it is a grace we give each other when we see fit, rather than according to the pattern of God

We need to look at both aspects, the lack of repentance and bestowing grace on ourselves.

2.1.1. Cheap Grace and the Lack of Repentance

To begin with, why does it matter if we have a cheap grace that lacks repentance? First and foremost it matters because it distorts the gospel of Christ. So Mark 1:14 describes Jesus preaching the gospel. Those are the words in Greek, proclaiming the Gospel, and the content of Jesus' gospel is "repent and believe".

At Jerusalem, we global Anglicans rightly and emphatically pointed to the great commission given to us by the Lord Jesus in Matthew 28. You have that repeated fourfold theme of "all", don't you? All authority is given to Jesus, proclaiming all he has taught. To All nations. Being with us for all time. And that commission gives us both the right and the duty to proclaim what Jesus has taught. The right because all authority is his. The duty because he, the one with all the authority, has told us to do so.

But people can cite even this great commission in Matthew 28 superficially. The key issue is, precisely *what* has Jesus taught? What is the *content* of his teaching that he tells us to proclaim to all? Here we must compare Scripture with Scripture, as good Anglicans do, and read Matthew 28 with Luke 24. Again these are words of the risen Christ. Let me read to you from 24:45 'then Jesus opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and he said to them, "thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.'" We heard in this morning's sermon from Ephesians that Christ is central to us, and this is how he is central, the one through whose name there is forgiveness of sins.

So what is the content of what we proclaim to all nations? Luke makes it clear doesn't he? The content of the great commission is the proclamation of repentance and forgiveness of sins in the name of Jesus. Peter picks up just that in the climax to his first speech in Acts 2. There he is, he has explained that Christ is risen from the dead and that this Jesus has been crucified by the people he was talking to... They ask him what

they should do. And his response (Acts 2:38) is to tell them to repent and be baptised in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins. Repentance and the forgiveness of sins. It's there again, isn't it? And so it goes on throughout the Acts of the Apostles. A high point, of course, is Acts 17:30, where Paul says that God now commands all people everywhere to repent, because there is coming judgement.

And you can see why repentance really matters. Classically I repent when I recognise my sin and I rely on the mercy of Jesus for my forgiveness. There is horror at my sin, but more than horror, there is a despair of myself and hope solely in Christ. Of course, we can then see why repentance is integral to becoming a Christian. I am turning from the flesh the world and the devil towards God. That's why our baptismal services have repentance. Now if there is no repentance then where am I with regard to the world? Well, I haven't turned away from it. I'm trying to be love God and the world at the same time. But no human being can face two ways at once, and you can see why cheap grace with its lack of repentance means that you remain facing towards the world and not facing towards God.

And we can't say that the Anglican tradition is just different. Think of the Book of Common Prayer services for morning and evening prayer. They begin with extensive prayers of repentance. Think of the 1662 version of the Lord supper. The exhortations underline we must not approach the Lord's Table lightly but repentantly. Baptism likewise involves repentance. This means that for centuries repentance has played a vital part both in Anglican worship, in our sacramental services and our ordinary services of morning and evening prayer. And this is explained very clearly in the homily about repentance - we should remember by the way that the Jerusalem Declaration refers us to the 39 Articles which in their turn point us to the two books of homilies. GAFCON has recognised the homilies as a spiritual resource for our guidance. So what does the homily on repentance say?

“no doctrine is so necessary in the church of God, as the doctrine of repentance and amendment of life. And verily the true preachers of the gospel - of the kingdom of heaven, and of the glad and joyful tidings of salvation - have always, in their godly sermons and preaching onto the people joined these two together; I mean repentance and forgiveness of sins even as our Saviour Jesus Christ did appoint himself”³ and then there’s a reference to Luke 24.

So, godly preachers in the Anglican tradition when they preach the gospel join repentance and forgiveness of sins together, following Christ.

The Anglican reformers weren’t out on their own here. In the continental reformed tradition, John Calvin states that ‘with good reason the sum of the gospel is held to consist in repentance and the forgiveness of sins.’⁴ The Lutheran Philip Melanchthon in his Apology for the Augsburg Confession makes exactly the same point.⁵

Now, you have heard church leaders from my country and from North America. How much honestly have you heard or seen this Luke 24 gospel of repentance and forgiveness of sins? Too little, I think. I think you have heard about millennium goals, and you have heard a lot about inclusion, an awful lot about inclusion, but an inclusion without repentance. And therein lies the tragedy, because if you offer inclusion without repentance, then you are offering inclusion without the forgiveness of sins. And that is desperate, isn’t it? First of all there is the question of blessing. In Acts 3:25-26 Peter refers to the blessing of the Gentiles under the Abrahamic covenant. He explains what this blessing is – the forgiveness of sins. There again Paul in Romans 4:7-8 quotes the psalmist David ‘Blessed is he whose sins are forgiven’. But in cheap grace,

³ Homily 32. ‘An Homily Of Repentance, And Of True Reconciliation Unto God.’ *The Homilies* Lewes. Focus Christian Ministries 1986:366.

⁴ *Institutes* 3.3.1.

⁵ Commenting on Article XII of the Augsburg Confession. P186 in *The Book of Concord* ed T. Tappert Philadelphia. Fortress 1959.

because there is no repentance there will be no forgiveness, because it's thought to be unnecessary, and the distinctive blessing of sins forgiven, well that's lost.

And that profoundly alters our relationship with God. He is no longer the God of the huge and generous mercy that he freely gives as he justifies us by his grace alone through faith in the Lord Jesus alone. Remember the parable that Jesus tells in Luke chapter 7. The two debtors one of whom owes a little while the other owes a fortune. Jesus teaches that the one who was forgiven much loves much, and the one who was forgiven little loves little.

Do you sense in the Western churches this great love of sinners who have been forgiven much by their heavenly Father? I see admirable concerns for social justice in my own church, as well as genuine good intention and kindness towards others, and a certain affection for God. But remember that the parable of Luke 7 is told in the context of the woman who washes Jesus's feet and dries them with her hair. There is an exuberance, a passion, a sense of her being overwhelmed by the goodness of the Lord Jesus to her that I think is alien in a church whose services no longer reflect the priority of repentance and the humble seeking of God's face as we turn away from the world.

The next aspect is something I say with trembling. When we read Luke 15 we read three parables that tell us in fact about God's joy at the repentant. It is joy in which we are expected to share. If I'm honest, I think the way that the Western churches have, not always explicitly denied, but minimised various sins and their eternal consequences means that God would find little to rejoice over in terms of our repentance. We don't really do it.

Now I want to be careful as I say that, because Western churches do repent of some sins, the legacy of racism, the history of colonialism, sins of social injustice within their

cultures. But what fascinates me is that these are sins that the world recognises as sins in Western culture. It's very safe in Western culture to say that racism is a sin. Very safe to repent of it. It even wins a certain admiration from the world.

It's always difficult to be sure about people's motives, but when western churches repent of the history of colonialism and the murder of indigenous peoples, are we doing it because it is offensive to God or because it is – rightly – offensive to the world? I think the acid test of whether our repentance is really towards God is when God and the world disagree. If the benchmark of what counts as sin and requires repentance is really God's will, then we will repent ourselves and call for repentance when God has said something is sinful, and will do so even when the world says otherwise. I very much fear that we fail this acid test, because I'm afraid that where we do repent, we repent of the things that the world finds offensive. As we all know too painfully, things that the Western world doesn't find offensive, like sexual sins, the Western churches are increasingly disinclined to condemn. Repentance like that: is it really turning to *God*, or acknowledging the *world*?

This question of repentance is huge. Biblically and historically and pastorally. In the parable of the lost son, the father speaks of a son who was lost and is now found who was dead and now alive. This is fantastic. The great commission, properly understood in those Reformation terms of repentance and forgiveness of sins based on Luke 24 is the most wonderful news there could be, yes? We can take news to people which means that they can wait confidently like the Thessalonian Christians for the return of the Lord Jesus who delivers from the wrath to come. The second thing I want to pick up is this self-bestowed grace. Self-bestowed grace just assumes that grace will come and that it is inconceivable that God could do otherwise than as we want. Traditionally, this self bestowing attitude is called presumption. Or we can just call it taking God for granted.

The Bible teaches us that presumption is deadly. So, in the Old Testament, the kingdom of Judah took it for granted that God would not finally judge them and they could take him for granted because they had the temple. In Luke 3 we find people coming before John the Baptist with presumption, and John rebukes them for it, telling them not to presume on the fact that they are physical descendants of Abraham. Again the problem is taking God for granted. And when Satan tempts our Lord Jesus Christ, he uses presumption again and Christ has to reject it - he will not take God for granted.

The theological tradition of which Anglicanism is a part, and in which the African Augustine played such a huge role, has thought long and hard about presumption.

Thomas Aquinas puts it like this:

[P]resumption is an inordinate trust in the Divine mercy or power, consisting in the hope of obtaining glory without merits, or pardon without repentance. Such like presumption seems to arise directly from pride, as though man thought so much of himself as to esteem that God would not punish him or exclude him from glory, however much he might be a sinner.⁶

Aquinas relates presumption to pride and comments that such presumption despises God's justice.⁷ We think so highly of ourselves we cannot imagine God being just towards us and punishing *us*, others perhaps but not us. Note too that Aquinas states presumption lacks repentance. But why bother to repent when we presume on God? So cheap grace with these two characteristics, lack of repentance, and presumption or self bestowed grace, relates intimately to pride. To humanity that is curved in on itself, absorbed by itself and not looking outwards to God and neighbour. Lack of repentance and presumption are two sides of the same coin

⁶ ST 2.2.21.4

⁷ ST 2.2.21.1

As you look at the conduct of the Western church, and what it tolerates and thinks needs no apology and no repentance, do you not sense presumption, taking of God for granted? To our shame I think I do.

Now obviously a westerner listening in may think this shows the usual obsession with sexual ethics, and same-sex relations in particular. Here we must remember that the kind of behaviour we're talking about, which the Western churches either openly approve or tacitly tolerate, is a symptom of something deeper. Rosaria Champagne Butterfield catches this brilliantly in her spiritual autobiography.⁸ She describes how the Lord Jesus brought her out of a same-sex lifestyle. And she reflects on the way that same-sex behaviour is a manifestation, as are other forms of sexual sin, as are our malice, gossip and violence, of our underlying pride and our claim to be owners and disposers of ourselves and our bodies without regard to our creator. For her, pride took this form of same-sex behaviour. For others of us it will be heterosexual adultery. For others of us, greed. For others, power. And so on. But the fundamental disorder is a disordered love of ourselves which leads us to imagine that God cannot possibly judge us - presumption. So that is cheap grace. Not biblical, not Anglican and desperately short-changing a world that needs to hear the gospel of repentance and forgiveness of sins.

3. Why is the West a cheap grace culture?

Where has it come from? Let me look first at Western culture and why it is a cheap grace culture. Why has Western culture become so graceless?

⁸ Rosaria Champagne Butterfield *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert* Pittsburgh. Crown and Covenant:2012.

Now we can all see that Western culture seems to have little room for God and less time for him. The culture may call itself secular, which could suggest neutrality. But actually it is hostile to speaking of God. That's why more and more human rights cases in the UK relate to Christians and their freedom of belief. This should amaze us. Western culture is a product in large part of Christian cultural contributions. That is so whether you are talking about the worldview that enables the scientific revolution. That is so whether you are talking about the worldview that enables a strong account of the need to respect the human individual. Why then so little room for God?

3.1. Kant and maturity

Intriguingly I don't think Western culture started down this path simply by saying 'We don't think God matters'. It didn't start with God at all. It started in large part with what we thought about human beings. The starting point is anthropology not theology. This is strikingly clear in Immanuel Kant's 1784 essay "What is Enlightenment?" He says:

Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another. This immaturity is self-incurred if its cause is not lack of understanding, but lack of resolution and courage to use it without the guidance of another. The motto of enlightenment is therefore....Have courage to use your own understanding!⁹

Let me try to set out what Kant is saying. His key idea is maturity. Humans have arrived at maturity. Because they are mature, two things follow. First a mature person is a competent person. Mature people make rational and correct decisions. Mature people need no external guidance. Secondly, there is a question of rights. An ethical question. Mature people are entitled to exercise their own judgement without external

⁹ Kant uses the pithy Latin motto 'Sapere aude!'

interference. So Kant uses maturity for two things. Maturity underpins both the claim to competence that human beings make and also the ethical claim to independence that human beings make. It means I do not need you to tell me what to do and it means you have no warrant in telling me what to do. In everyday terms, you should mind your own business.

Well, on Kant's view why on earth would you need God to reveal things to you? You do not need him to tell you his law. You can work it out yourself, and of course bound up with this maturity is the idea that I can do righteousness. Mature people have self-control and since we are self-controlled we can will the good. Therefore not only do I not need revelation but I do not need justification and imputed righteousness from the Lord Jesus because logically I can do it myself, as a mature person.

Think how offensive classic Anglican theology is to Kant's view. Take Homily 1 which is on Scripture:

Therefore as many as be desirous to enter into the right and perfect way unto God, must apply their minds to know Holy Scripture; without the which, they can neither sufficiently know God and his will, neither their office and duty.¹⁰

Of course, it's not surprising when you think about it that in order to know what God desires you should listen to what he says. But that's the thing about homily 1 – it's concerned for relationship between persons, which involves listening. Yet it's not only our need for revelation that Anglican theology asserts, but our inability to be righteous in and of ourselves in any complete sense. Take this statement from homily 2.

¹⁰ Homily 1 'A Fruitful Exhortation To The Reading And Knowledge Of Holy Scripture' *The Homilies* Lewes. Focus Christian Ministries 1986:1.

For of ourselves we be crab trees, that can bring forth no apples. We be of ourselves of such earth, as can bring forth but weeds, nettles, brambles, briers, cockle, and darnel.¹¹

Think about it, the fruit we bear is not apples – we cannot bring forth apples because of what we are after the Fall, people whose hearts are inclined to evil (Genesis 6:5, 8:21). Kant's maturity is utterly different, isn't it?

3.2. Maturity and Entitlement

After Kant, this maturity is assumed and treated as an entitlement. It is not something that you have to earn.

This takes us to something vital in current Western culture. Our sense of entitlement. I think we can see this in two areas, the first is our emphasis on rights. The second is the growth, socially speaking, of narcissism, a destructive form of self-regard that I'll explain more later.

3.2.1. Entitlement and the 'growth' of rights

So, first the growth of rights.

Europe and North America are very much rights cultures. For us in Europe it's the European Convention on human rights, especially the rights that flow out of equality. Please note several features about this.

3.2.1.1. individualism

¹¹ Homily 2 'A Sermon Of The Misery Of All Mankind, And Of His Condemnation To Death Everlasting By His Own Sin'. *The Homilies* 1986:10

First, individualism. We all wonder why Western Europe is so individualist. But of course it's individualist, it has a doctrine of rights that the individual holds, and in many ways that's as basic as it gets. The basic building block of society is the individual, not the family, because the individual is the right holder. What's more, those rights are just there. You don't have to earn them they are just there. You don't have to qualify for them. You just have them, you're born to them.

3.2.1.2. Incoherent – rights without foundation or duties

Second, when you come down to it, this is incoherent. There is strangely little discussion of *why* you have those rights and where they come from. The history of these ideas in Europe is that people are thought of as having rights because those rights are God's gift to his human creatures. So the Americans put it in terms of men and women being endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights. But in modern Europe you can't assert God or creation in the public arena. So there's a problem. Roman Catholic thinker Marcello Pera points out that this means that the modern West is busy trying to forget where it came from.¹² It is an amnesiac culture. It's intriguing, isn't it? How can you have a strong sense of identity as a culture when you won't acknowledge your history? The modern West wants all the benefits of a society with individual rights, but doesn't want the basis on which they were actually formed. It is like climbing a tree, sitting on a branch and then chopping off the branch you're sitting on. It's the same kind of problem that atheist German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche spotted in the mid 19th century. He posed the question of whether Europe could keep its morality without its God. He mocked the English especially for thinking this was possible. As someone brought up in England, I reckon he was spot on, as is Marcello Pera. Because if, as the modern West says, you can't talk about God giving us these rights, where do they come from? People don't want to say the rights are only given

¹² *Why We Should Call Ourselves: The Religious Roots Of Free Societies* 2008. Translated by L.B. Lappin New York/London Encounter Books. 2011.

by society, because society could then take them away. So what are you left with? Well the individual. And the individual becomes king or queen. Lots of individuals, that means lots of kings and queens, or people who think they are.

Now don't underestimate the problems this creates. You've got this robust doctrine of rights. But can you really build a society just on rights, the rights of the individual? What happens when those rights conflict, one individual with another? I think that's what some of you in global south observe about us, that our individualism breeds various conflicts, and in particular an individualism where the individual prefers himself or herself to the good of others.

As it happens these problems were seen long ago in the 19th century by another Catholic thinker Giuseppe Mazzini. Mazzini argued it is not enough to speak of rights. We must speak of duties too. In fact, he said, when we look at Christ we must look for duty first because that is where Jesus leads us. Think of his summary of the Law. And Mazzini says:

“The origin of your duties is in God. The definition of your duties is found in his law. The progressive discovering of the application of his law is the task of humanity.”¹³

But you can see the problem for the West can't you? It's all very well to talk of individual rights, but where do *duties* come from? Why do we Westerners have all these declarations of rights, and not declarations of duty? What do you all sense about this in the West, do you sense we have as robust a sense of our duties as of our rights?

3.2.1.3. *Attractive*

¹³ *The Duties Of Man* London. Everyman (Dent) 1907: 21

And this is enormously attractive. Whether we like it or not we have managed to evolve a system in which there are fundamental individual rights and we talk about those a lot, but we have very little to say at a fundamental level about human duties. Now we may feel that it is incoherent to talk about rights without duties. But my goodness it's attractive. And that is what the modern West is holding out to us culturally speaking. Tempting isn't it?

3.2.1.4. Plausible

But this is not only attractive, this is plausible. It is plausible not least because of the technological achievements of the West. When I look at my computer or use my phone I am deeply impressed by what human minds have done. Remember that Kant used the word maturity to imply our competence and our ability. Doesn't it tempt you to think that Kant is right? Surely we are as competent, we are as able as he said. If I may say so frankly to you in the global South, I am not sure that you have fully taken this on board: Kant's value system is going to look very plausible in your cultures as well as very attractive.

3.2.1.5. Powerful

Not only is this attractive and plausible, this culture is now enormously powerful. The assumption of maturity and the sense of entitlement that goes with it create values that are being pumped around the world through this technological achievement. You cannot keep it out by border posts or immigration control. People will read this stuff and they *will be* impressed by it, and because we in the West just say it all as part of our presuppositions, it will become for you the air that you breathe too. Sometimes of course, the West is much more overt in imposing values. As a UK citizen I am still deeply ashamed of the way a few years back that our Prime Minister David Cameron tied foreign aid to pro-same-sex policies in a speech. Western culture says a lot, it shouts a lot, and it spends a lot. Do not underestimate its power to reshape your cultures in its own image. And remember it will *want* to do so. Because it thinks it is

righteous. I'm sure you sense that too, haven't you, the Western sense of self-righteousness about its doctrines of individual rights?

So that's the first thing to say about our sense of entitlement, the way it creates and is also supported by this doctrine of individualist rights without duties.

3.2.2. Entitlement and Narcissism

Let me take you now to the social phenomenon of narcissism. I'm using this especially because of recent work by American social psychologists Jean M. Twenge and Keith Campbell. They have a simple starting point. They conducted a prolonged survey of surveys done on American students entering study. The surveys are standard and amongst other things they test for narcissism. Twenge and Campbell put it like this:

“the central feature of narcissism is a very positive and inflated view of the self. People with high levels of narcissism - whom we refer to as “narcissists” - think they are better than others in social status, good looks, intelligence, and creativity. ... narcissists see themselves as fundamentally superior - they are special, entitled, and unique. Narcissists also lack emotionally warm, caring, and loving relationships with other people. ...the result is a fundamentally imbalanced self - a grandiose, inflated self-image and a lack of deep connection to others.”¹⁴

Now Twenge and Campbell aren't saying that this profile fits everyone. They are saying, though, that it fits more and more people and that the attitudes that underlie this are more and more socially acceptable. For Twenge this is painfully evidenced as the quest for self respect morphs into a quest for self-esteem, not quite the same thing. She sees it encapsulated in the chorus of a Whitney Houston song which says “learning

¹⁴ *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living In The Age Of Entitlement* New York/London. Free Press. 2009:19.

to love yourself is the greatest love of all”¹⁵ It almost stops you in your tracks doesn’t it? The greatest love of all is loving yourself. And some schools adopt the strategy of increasing self-esteem with young children by teaching them precisely that and playing that song. My colleague who is director of Youth and Children’s ministry read an earlier draft of this address – her comment was, ‘This is basically what our education system is now about!’

The key word here is entitlement.

3.2.2.1. Narcissism – theologically

We need to make two things that flow from this. First theologically, this is not a doctrine of works righteousness. It is not saying you earn your way to eternal life. This is not Pelagianism but the different beast of entitlement. Entitlement is not about what we do or earn so much as thinking so highly of ourselves just by virtue of who we are and our natures, that we think good things automatically belong to us and it is intolerable that we should be frustrated.

3.2.2.2. Narcissism, disappointment and rage

Secondly, Twenge and Campbell point to the disappointments this entitlement attitude causes. Of course it disappoints. Not everyone can become a pop star. Not every essay gets an A. And the person with the entitlement attitude is ill-equipped to cope. Twenge and Campbell discuss how prone disappointed narcissists are to anger and rage. Of course, disappointment can make any of us angry but Twenge and Campbell note how extreme it is. For me it is very interesting to read what Twenge and Campbell say about entitlement and the rage that follows frustration after what happened in my own country in November 2012 when the majority arguing in favour of a particular kind of

¹⁵ *Generation Me* New York/London. Free Press 2006: 44.

pro-women bishops legislation could not get its way. The only word that describes it is rage.

3.3. The dangers of dissent

This explains why certain kinds of dissent are deeply problematic now in Western culture. If you challenge entitlement, the perception is that you have attacked rights, and are attacking people's self esteem, and these are perceived as great moral errors. And that is why the modern West in its culture will only hear a word of cheap grace, because cheap grace does not demand repentance and it can be bestowed by ourselves. But the real grace, linked with repentance and forgiveness of sins, that now challenges Western culture at a very deep level, and it's no surprise when you read Western media how frequently the comments about religious conservatives are comments of rage. The summary phrase is 'How dare you say that!'

4. The western church and cheap grace

But where is the Western church in all this? Why has the Western church become prone to promoting cheap grace?

4.1. Bafflement at the failure of modernisation

First of all, let's remember how puzzling the situation is for Western churches. Think of it, so much of the leadership of major Western denominations, including the Church of England, has made a virtue of trying to modernise itself. That's the language used, and the project is to bring the church into line with the world around it. Now the theory behind that was that if the church did this, people in the secular West would come back to church in their droves. That hasn't happened. People within the Church of England don't much like the term managing decline, but make no mistake that is frequently but not invariably the mindset. But if you have committed yourself to a programme of

“modernisation” then it is baffling to find that the modern world still doesn’t want you. But it will be enormously costly at an emotional level to try to think through why. It seems almost impossible for past and present Church of England leaders to ask whether their modernisation programme is part of the problem.

You will be asked in the global south to go in for ‘modernisation’ – please don’t fall for it. It is a recipe for disaster – look at us.

4.2. Spiritualised narcissism?

Secondly you may be thinking that I’m being too hard. So let me describe a recent service of evening prayer at a conference of relatively senior leaders within dioceses in the Church of England. Those leading the service had a presentation which spoke of three calls. The first call was to love God. The second call was to love your neighbour. The third was to be yourself.

Does anything strike you about that? What strikes me is that self is right up there with love of God and love of neighbour. And this was not given to us by the Lord Jesus but is something we have made up and put on a level with the other two. These three calls were then explained. Most time was on the call to be yourself, which involved identifying your desires and following them. It looks remarkably like the sense of entitlement and self-first that Twenge and Campbell discern in the entitlement culture doesn’t it? It is a spiritualisation of narcissism, I’m afraid.

4.3. Roots for putting self at the centre

Thirdly let us try to see something of the roots. Remember I said that Kant’s enlightenment thinking didn’t start by talking about God. It started by talking about humanity, about ourselves. That is what has happened in the Church of England, I think. Let me take you back over 100 years to the publication of the hugely influential *Lux Mundi* essays in 1889. Several essayists shared the key point that when John 1:9

speaks of the true light enlightening all, it means that even before the incarnation of the Lord Jesus we already had divine light and reason within us. We have the divine light of reason within and so can tell from within what is right and wrong. But this means, of course, that we are back to talking about us. Again, our anthropology may be shaping, is shaping, our theology.

Crucially, John definitely does not mean this. If we had that divine light of reason within us, already illuminating us so that we could tell right from wrong, as the essayists thought, then the world would not have rejected the true light when he did come into the world. That is exactly the point that John makes in verses 10 and 11 that the world was made through him, that he had his own people, and Christ was still rejected. John's references to light are best taken as a reference to the light of life, the creative activity of the eternal Word, which John has in view in 1:4 and 5.

Thirdly, if the divine light is already at work illuminating the reason, giving this knowledge of right and wrong, and this applies to the whole human race, then the logic is we should listen to the world, isn't it? It implies we should indeed let the world set the agenda, because the world already has this eternal light within it. I fear that this is what much of the current Church of England sounds like to me – let the world set the agenda.

This is an important for listening and weighing what a western church says. The issue is not so much, 'Is there an explicit reference to Christ's agenda?' but rather of course 'Is the agenda that of Christ as attested by the Scriptures, or that of my inner Christ who has always illuminated me?'¹⁶ A second question is, 'Is the world setting the agenda with equal authority to Christ's?'

¹⁶ 'Christ as attested by the Scriptures' was the formula adopted by the Barmen Declaration of 1934.

But as you go through John's gospel, you can see, can't you, that John doesn't mean that. In John 7:7, Jesus himself tells us that the world hates him. It hates because he testifies against it that its deeds are evil. Now that's impossibly wrong on the *Lux Mundi* view isn't it? If you're following those essayists then Jesus would be quite wrong to see the sharp distinction that he does, in fact the sharp opposition that he does, from the world towards him.

Now, I've shown briefly that this exegesis of John 1:9 is desperately wrong. But please understand that this theology has been running round, and indeed running, the Church of England for decades. And it opens the door to cheap grace, because it says yes not just to Jesus but also to the world. It's not an explicit 'no' to Jesus, but it is a Jesus *and* the world approach. As you look at us in the Church of England, I'm afraid you are looking at a church which has an increasingly worldly view of grace, a cheap grace in which repentance is redundant, and which we can safely bestow on ourselves because we already have divine light within us and we know when God will give grace to us. Frighteningly, on this view God will never disagree with this, because his voice comes from within us. As I look at what is happening to the church in which I was ordained, I'm very struck by the way that what Twenge and Campbell say about narcissism and entitlement applies. They analyse the almost religious feel of western narcissism like this. "The quest for self is in some ways the misguided quest for the divine spark within"¹⁷. It could come straight from *Lux Mundi*.

5. Conclusion

Now we have teased out why cheap grace with its worldliness is inevitably going to be there in Western culture and in one of the dominant forms within the Western church. Joining Jesus with the world so that we say Jesus *and* the world is always going to be popular at least as a way of appeasing the world. And the Western world

¹⁷ *The Narcissism Epidemic*: 65

right now does issue challenges to the church to modernise. By which it means, catch up with worldly opinion.

But while the world may want cheap grace, it is not what the world needs. To cheap grace Bonhoeffer opposed costly grace, a costly grace which costs us everything in that it is grace that we receive repentantly and with humility not presumption. That is the grace associated with the forgiveness of sins and peace with God. The world's needs are many, we all know that, but this is its greatest need, that its sins be forgiven. And that is why it is absolutely imperative that we at GAFCON preach not cheap grace, but costly grace to the world, not because we hate the world but because we love it, as our saviour did.