

Ash Wednesday 2020 Cathedral

Well after 4 years in this diocese on Saturday I finally knew I had arrived. I was at last a guest of the Directors at Ipswich Town FC vs Oxford Utd. Truth be told I couldn't give a monkey's about the score, but I did enjoy the not inconsiderable food and drink, the banter with the directors, conversation with the staff and the company of my daughter who came along for the ride. And as I was driving home, while my daughter was listening to Love Island the Soundtrack It struck me that living a while without being bothered about the score might not be a bad way to do Lent.

Most of us keep the score all the time don't we? Relationships are often reduced to scorekeeping: I did this for you and you've done nothing for me. I shopped the last three times, while you played tennis. I changed the baby's last two nappies while you got a full 8 hours sleep. I cooked every evening last week and you don't even do me a sandwich when you're doing yourself one. Friendships are full of scorekeeping too. I called you the last 5 times, but you only call me when you need a favour. Sibling relationships are choc a bloc with scorekeeping; I've been the one to take care of Dad when he got sick, while you're living it up in Bury St Edmunds.

We keep score at home, at work, all over the place. The gospel tonight is about scorekeeping, and in particular scorekeeping with God. It's a way that God and everyone else will know that you are winning the game of religion. To this Jesus says "beware of practising your piety before others in order to be seen by them" Jesus says, when you give money or pray or fast, do it in such a way that no one knows what you're doing. And when he says nobody, he means nobody, including yourself. Jesus says "do not let the right hand know what the left hand is doing". Jesus says you can't even keep your own score.

The theological name for scorekeeping is "justification by works" It's a way of living life as if it were a contest to be won, a battle out of which one must emerge the victor, a trial during which one must justify one's good if not great character. This is the way of the old Adam, and frankly put it is the way of death. You can never justify yourself enough: you must always keep on striving.

The pop-star and born again Christian Kanye West would disagree with me. Following the widespread acclaim and media adulation over his 2010 album, *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*, he announced that he had received the exact amount of approval he needed to attain and had therefore retired from the entertainment industry to live on a small farm in Iowa. Though known for his outsized ego and grandstanding lyrics West said "all that is over now" and explained to reporters "my goal all along was to be praised and talked about until I reach a level of total contentment with who I am and where I belong in the world, and on Friday night of last week, I reached that level". He added "I finally feel satisfied and whole as a human being, which means I can stop being a famous pop star now".

Now his life style since that statement in 2011 doesn't really seem to back any of this up – I mean he's definitely got the farm bug, purchasing a 14 million dollar farm in Wyoming with 4000 acres, but the albums have kept coming, thank the Lord, and the striving keeps going and going and going. But before we start giving Kanye a hard time, we might remember that we co-opt even Lent for *our* scorecard – seeing how well we do on shedding weight, eating healthier or praying more frequently. Now don't get me wrong, there's nothing bad about these practices BUT to make it all about how well I'm doing rather misses the point on Ash Wednesday, when all our attempts at arrival, mastery

and control are stripped away. We are reminded both by the words we say and the burned palms imposed on our foreheads, that we are frail mortals who will die, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. All our striving, all our accumulation, all our effort, none of it can dodge this bullet.

But Ash Wednesday also suggests that though your death and my death make a mockery of the scoreboard, there was and is another's death that renders all scorekeeping in life utterly absurd. Maybe for Lent what we should give up is the entire project of self-justification, of making God's love contingent on our own achievements which, thank God, it is not.

The theologian Robert Capon has an interesting description of hell which is all about keeping scores. He says hell is about championing the right with such fervour that there's a permanent unwillingness to forgive, so that wrong should be prevented where it can and punished wherever not but that it must in NO circumstances ever be absolved. That's the hell of hell says Capon, and it's presided over by the rightest angel who ever lived.

I love that, and isn't it the case that one of the most difficult things for human beings is to be right without hurting someone. Let me repeat that. Try that one for Lent.

Capon then describes heaven – which is the home not of the smugly righteous but of the forgiven forgivers...he says "everyone in heaven, including God, has decided to die to the question of who's wrong; whereas nobody in hell can shut up about who's right"

Let me give you an example of what this strange kingdom might look like – utilising a scene from the novel *The Overstory* which won the 2019 Pulitzer prize for fiction. A woman comes to see a therapist who has a thriving practice but a highly unusual method; she and her client look directly at each other, locking eyes and not saying a word for a full three hours. Strange, eh? Try staring at another person for more than six seconds. Most people, even newly in love people, find it too intimidating and too intimate to hold that gaze. But the therapy works. Her waiting list is a mile long. The session the novel describes includes the thoughts going through the patient Stephanie's head, thoughts like "Do I make sense to you? Am I much like everyone else?" The tension builds and I quote

"At half an hour, Stephanie melts down. She's hungry, stiff, itchy and so sick of herself she wants to sleep forever. The truth seeps out of her, a bodily discharge. You shouldn't trust me. I don't deserve this. You see? I'm messed up in ways my children don't even suspect"

What the therapist does, and why her therapy works, is to look directly at her clients without judgement for as long as they need. Finally after 3 hours Stephanie and the therapist burst into tears: Stephanie muses "who are you? Why won't you stop? No one has ever looked at me like this, except to judge – In my whole life, my whole life, never"

The kingdom of God's beloved Son is not the realm of the ones who are self-justified, it is not the realm of the ones who are right, it isn't even the realm of the ones who are good – it is the realm of the forgiven. Though we may wish to continue to let our left hand and everyone else know what our right hand is doing, the truth of the matter is that God is not keeping the score. So for Lent let's take | Then maybe we will begin to see the ash on our forehead not as that which consigns us to futility but much more as that which entrusts us to God's absolute dependability Then maybe we'll begin to take God's cue and cut each other a bit of slack and loosen our grip on the scorecard. Then maybe we'll be released to focus on living lives where those closest to us are loved not assessed, where

friends are played with not competed with, and where even Ipswich Town's results can be taken with a pinch of salt.