

# St Edmundsbury Cathedral



FOURTH SUNDAY BEFORE LENT

9 February 2025

St Edmundsbury Cathedral

Sermon by the Revd Canon Matthew Vernon

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You may know the story of God talking to the angels when God was making the world. God couldn't decide where to put the God-like bit, God's image. One angel suggested putting it at the top of the highest mountain. But God said, "no, people will climb every high mountain and eventually find the secret." Another angel suggested burying it deep in the ground. But God said, "no, these people will dig and explore the ground, and eventually find the secret." The angels suggested other places but came up against the same problem. Then God said, "I've got it. I'll put my image deep inside people. They will never think to look there." And since the beginning, people have been climbing, digging, diving, exploring, searching for something that is already in them.

John Butler lives in Bakewell, Derbyshire. He is 87 years old and every day he goes to the parish church to meditate: 5.00 am to 7.00 am and 4.00 pm to 5.30 pm. He's been do this for 27 years since moving back to Bakewell, his home town. Back then the vicar was supportive and gave him a key to the church. Vicars since have varied. One asked why John doesn't do something useful!

Staying in Bakewell at the New Year, I went with some friends to meditate with John - in the afternoon, not early morning. We also met one morning to hear his story. As a young man he travelled aboard and was keen to help fix the world. He came to realise that "to make whole, you have to be whole" and he took up meditation.

There are various striking things about John. One is his steady eyes when he looks at you: undefended, non-judgemental eyes, not distracted or nervous.

Also striking is his language about sin and the life of the Spirit. John spoke with clarity and confidence about the reality of the Spirit beyond this physical world. Our culture is so focussed on this material world, we are uncertain about the greater reality of life in the Spirit. John said in this earthly, physical life we are mired in sin. Everything that is not of the Spirit is sin and will die away. He said "thank God we die" because then we live on in the Spirit. I guess that perspective is easier when you get to his age. I noticed that John speaks about sin as delusion and misunderstanding about the nature of things, and not about guilt or unworthiness.

In our religion, there is a lot of talk of sin as guilt and unworthiness. And there is plenty that feeds that mentality. Some of us carry a deep sense of inadequacy, perhaps fuelled by various, painful life experiences. Different personality types are part of that mix. Cultural expectations compound our feeling that we must do better. In our religion we can project this on to God and imagine God to be perfectionist and disapproving. And we project onto God without knowing what we do.

In this morning's Bible readings, Isaiah and Peter both exclaim a sense of unworthiness. Isaiah's vision of heaven leads him to say, 'Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!' The seraph touches his mouth with the coal and declares: 'Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.' And Isaiah hears the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I; send me!'

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In response to the great catch of fish, Peter “fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, ‘Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!’ Jesus replies, ‘Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.’”

Notice how Isaiah is told his guilt has departed and how he is ready to say “Here am I; send me”. Notice how Jesus says to Peter “Do not be afraid; come with me.” For both, the response from God’s and the response from Jesus is not “yes, you are unclean, you are sinful”. The response is “you are worthy to share in my life”.

It can take years to realise that we are worthy. It took me 45 years give or take. Meditation was key, learning the simple satisfaction of the presence of God. Therapy helped too: the blessing of a wise person’s insight. And on a retreat God’s compassion broke through - I realised that I am enough.

Which is heart of the Gospel: God’s grace and mercy, God’s compassion and love. The whole point is that we are worthy in God’s eyes, we are accepted by grace, and we already have what we are searching for. As Thomas Merton put it, “Everything has been given to us in Christ. All we need is to experience what we already possess.”

“Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Blessed are those who are called to his supper.” Lord we are worthy to receive you, because you have said the word and we are healed.