

## OUR CALLING FOR THE COMMON GOOD

Sermon for the first Sunday in Lent, 1 March 2020, at Bolton Priory, Skipton, North Yorkshire.

**Jenny Sinclair**

*Readings: Genesis 3: 1-6, Matthew 4: 1-11, Collect for the first Sunday of Lent*

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All the readings today show us how desperate “the great deceiver” is to tempt us to reject God. He will try anything.

Temptation often comes in disguise. It can be “a delight to the eyes”. It can look virtuous. It often comes with attractive promises: it will give us “all the kingdoms of the world.”

Back in the Garden of Eden, Eve falls for it. She believes that by rejecting God’s advice she will be made wise, that her “eyes will be opened, and she will be *like God*.”

In our own time, many people have fallen for this false promise. They have fallen for the proposition that belief in God is something for older people. They say we’ve grown out of that. That it’s just medieval superstition.

This is sometimes referred to as ‘modernity’s wager’<sup>1</sup>. Basically, a gamble. They’re betting that life without God will be just fine.

But, as the philosopher Nietzsche predicted, when God is no longer seen as the primary agent, we will see the primacy of the self emerge. This is of course exactly what we are seeing now. The “I”, the “me” culture. Individualism. Where I’m the primary agent. God has no place.

And this undermines the Common Good.

Many people live without the knowledge that they are loved by God. And when a culture focuses on the self, it becomes resistant to the transcendent and it loses its depth. It becomes selfish and materialistic: relationships suffer and trust breaks down. And that leads to all sorts of problems.

But - we know there *is* a transcendent dimension to human existence. We know the reality is that this *is* God’s world. He *is* the primary agent. As Christians we know this, which is why our tradition honours the sanctity of human life. Part of this reality is that we are social beings who thrive in relationship.

In Lent, we ask for God’s Grace to use this period of abstinence to help us strive for holiness in our lives. To be closer to him - and to build trust with each other. As human beings we are inherently interwoven with God. We live in relationship with him and we are designed to live in relationship with each other. This is a sacred mystery.

We feel it in that profound sense of humility that we experience in the Eucharist. Or when we are deeply moved in moments of love, pain, birth, death, loss or wonder. And we can experience it in encounter with our fellow human beings. Often in the most unexpected ways and places.

But those who fall for the temptation of “being like God” essentially are *playing God*. And this condemns them to a two dimensional life, a materialistic life. Like a room with no windows.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Practices-Refounding-Gods-People-Missional/dp/0819233846>

We need to see through the great deceiver's false promises: because they will condemn us to a life without meaning.

So it's good to be attentive to God's communication this Lent. Because he needs us to be his hands and feet on Earth. To resist that individualism that is so contrary to our nature.

The people whom Jesus calls are ordinary people like us. He calls all of us to a unique role. This is something I didn't really understand - until eight years ago when it happened to me.

If I may, I'll share my story with you.

I grew up in a church household, somewhat in the spotlight, as my father David Sheppard, before entering the Church, had been an England Test cricketer.

And as Anglican bishop in Liverpool he became famous again for his partnership with his Catholic counterpart, Archbishop Derek Worlock, and their joint leadership in Liverpool at a time of division.

But I was a bit of a rebel during that time and drifted away from the Church. I had no proper career, working in local government and graphic design.

Then after meeting my husband in my late twenties, unexpectedly I had a conversion experience. After careful discernment I was received into the Catholic Church.

All my assumptions were turned upside down and I felt as if I was to start all over again. I began my own journey with Christ. My parents understood and we remained close. Over the next 20 years or so I flourished in a good marriage, and in motherhood.

After my parents died, I took on the responsibility of their legacy. But I had a lingering sense that I'd failed to live up to my calling - my vocational responsibility. I sensed there was more.

And about eight years ago, in my late forties, I felt a prompting of the Spirit. I didn't understand what was going on at first. I asked God to make it clear to me. I prayed 'Lord, what are you trying to tell me?'

I found myself being drawn to look more closely at the partnership of my father and Archbishop Worlock. But this wasn't my interest, and my first instinct was, no, that's not for me... and I didn't know where to start.

But I remembered my father saying 'who are your allies?' So I asked for help and people joined me. We investigated the Sheppard Worlock partnership: what made it so successful? what could be learned for now? We called our work *Together for the Common Good*.

We learned that they disagreed on doctrine and churchmanship, and yet they resolved to work together for the good of the city - at a time of social unrest, division, political instability and sectarianism.

They became known for putting people and community first. For bringing people together across divides. Building bridges.

Their body language said it all. Standing side by side with communities, it was clear they were acting *for* and *with* people and not in their own institutional self-interest.

They encouraged local leadership. They helped to build up local institutions and forge links between them. They encouraged business to play its part in the regeneration of the region.

They saw themselves as brothers in Christ. Their partnership lasted twenty years and they earned public affection which still exists today. People in Liverpool will tell you ‘oh yes - they were on our side’.

And as we looked more closely, we saw the reasons why it was ground-breaking. They brought complementary gifts. They knew God was the primary agent. They listened to what he was doing and joined in. This modelled an outward-facing church playing its part in civic life, rehumanising, building relationships, honouring the sanctity of human life.

We think this inspiration is now not only for church leaders, but the whole people of the Church. But we are not naïve enough to inherit their legacy wholesale. This is a new time and it warrants new responses.

But like them, our view is that the community is only complete if all participate. Like them, we know that God made us as social beings and that we thrive in relationship.

Like them, we know that the individualist “me” culture prevents human flourishing; that ‘Modernity’s Wager’ leads to loneliness, depression, lack of fulfilment, lack of purpose. We see that decades of individualism have affected our society. Our local institutions have been weakened, especially in disadvantaged areas.

We have become less interdependent, less willing to listen to others with whom we disagree. Getting stuck in echo chambers leads to a distorted sense of reality. This is threatening our social fabric.

We have lost the language of mutual obligation and responsibility. Our culture has rejected God and become resistant to the transcendent.

We want the Church to understand this challenge so that it becomes part of the solution. People across the churches are well-placed, in parishes, neighbourhoods and workplaces to play their part to help build back the bonds of social trust. To be a *relational people*. To be a counter-cultural force against individualism.

The “me” culture is a symptom of the rejection of God. The promises of the great deceiver do not bring flourishing. It is a false prospectus.

But we can be a counter cultural antidote - by building relationships outside our silos, and with people who have lost hope, or who are estranged, or mutually suspicious. By bridging the fractures we see in our society: between old and young, rural and urban, rich and poor. By living a shared life with people who have been marginalised.

Our work at Together for the Common Good (T4CG) involves calling people across the churches to fulfil their vocational responsibilities - according to their unique gifts and abilities - by putting Common Good principles into practice, and by working with others of different opinions, classes and backgrounds in shared purpose.

We have a programme for schools,<sup>2</sup> Common Good training for lay people<sup>3</sup> and church leaders, we give advice, run talks and sessions and hold public debates from time to time. Our website<sup>4</sup> is full of resources. Our newsletter<sup>5</sup> goes to more than 2000 people across the UK and overseas, cross-pollinating news of Common Good activity across the different church traditions.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/training/common-good-schools>

<sup>3</sup> <https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/training/here-now-us-people>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.togetherforthecommongood.co.uk>

<sup>5</sup> [http://bit.ly/T4CG\\_News\\_Lent2020](http://bit.ly/T4CG_News_Lent2020)

T4CG is a tiny volunteer-driven charity, punching above its weight through many partnerships with dioceses, churches and charities.

The Common Good is not a utopian ideal. It cannot be imposed. It is about building a *shared life* and it is generated by people working together across class, opinion and background. Common Good in a Christian sense is about *encounter* between people. It is about the sacred nature of human beings.

As Rowan Williams says “*when we meet another human person we are standing on sacred ground.*”

That includes not only the people we love. But also people we may not like.

It includes building a common life with people on the margins who may be broken and struggling.

We see this throughout the life of Christ. He shows us that encounter with people who are poor or vulnerable is a place where the veil between heaven and earth is thin. The whole body benefits when the most vulnerable are included.

This is in direct opposition to the great deceiver’s temptation. The Church at its best is a place where people find an encounter with the spiritual, and which offers a sense of family *no matter what*. A sense of belonging.

The people Jesus calls are ordinary people, and we are to live in communion with God and with each other. This really is a radically different, counter-cultural way of looking at the world.

During this Lent we will all be tempted to believe that we are in control, that God is somehow secondary. But we must keep our lines of communication open with God and trust him.

Temptations often come well-disguised - masquerading as the good guys, claiming virtue. We could easily get swept along. Especially in this time of cultural confusion. We can be duped by false promises that sound good, that sound fair, that sound logical. All is not what it seems.

So we must be clear about our centre of gravity. That we are rooted firmly in Christ and maintain our dialogue with him in prayer. This will help us to resist the persuasive language of a dominant culture that has lost its way.

As human beings with a transcendent nature we are inherently interwoven with God. As Jesus says, human beings do “not live by bread alone” but by the Word of God.

And so it is through him and through building trust with each other, that we find our mutual flourishing. We are each other’s gifts.

God chooses ordinary people.

He is calling us to be a relational people, to build the Common Good and together to accomplish extraordinary things.

***Jenny Sinclair*** is founder director of *Together for the Common Good*, a charity working to strengthen the bonds of social trust. T4CG calls and resources people to fulfil their vocational responsibility by putting Common Good principles into practice. Partnering with people across the churches, T4CG offers resources, training and events to reimagine a culture that overcomes division and puts people, communities and relationships first.

## Together for the Common Good (T4CG)

Find out more <http://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/>

Read our latest newsletter [http://bit.ly/T4CG\\_News\\_Lent2020](http://bit.ly/T4CG_News_Lent2020)

Visit our website <http://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/>

Support our work <https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/donate>

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## READINGS

### Collect for the first Sunday of Lent

O LORD, who for our sake didst fast forty days and forty nights: Give us grace to use such abstinence, that, our flesh being subdued to the Spirit, we may ever obey thy godly motions in righteousness and true holiness, to thy honour and glory, who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Ghost, one God, world without end. Amen.

### Old Testament Reading, Genesis 3: 1-6 (NRSV)

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?" The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'" But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate.

### Gospel Matthew 4: 1-11 (NRSV)

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.