

## **Requiem Eucharist 2015**

### **Grave Talk: 'Purgatory?'**

When Henry VIII first declared UDI from the Bishop of Rome he didn't think he was aligning himself with the Protestant churches of Europe. The first Ten articles of religion produced by Thomas Cranmer asserted belief in the use of images in churches, the honouring of saints and the Virgin Mary, the invocation of saints and the doctrine of Purgatory and prayers for the dead in Purgatory.

When Henry died, however, the church and nation lurched in a more Protestant direction and though it lurched back under Mary, when Elizabeth came to the throne it was a Protestant or at least a Reformed Catholic settlement that held sway with the 39 Articles of Religion being the standard to which clergy and holders of public office were required to subscribe.

#### *XXII. OF PURGATORY*

*THE Romish Doctrine concerning Purgatory, Pardons, Worshipping, and Adoration, as well of Images as of Reliques, and also invocation of Saints, is a fond thing vainly invented, and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the Word of God.*

So that's it. Purgatory has gone along with other Romish beliefs and practices. Though no-one nowadays has to subscribe to the 39 articles of Religion, we – that is licensed clergy in the Church of England – do have to affirm our belief in the faith to which the historic formularies of the Church of England, including the 39 articles, bear witness.

I don't think many people these days – even the most Catholic – deny that the religious and economic use, or abuse, that the doctrine of Purgatory was put to in the Middle Ages needed reforming. The 22<sup>nd</sup> Article places Purgatory and Pardons side by side and it was the economic relationship between the two – and the power that the Church exercised by this – that became scandalous.

It started with the ancient penitential system. Penance was given not as a way of earning forgiveness – as it was later characterised by Protestant reformers – but as a way of both expressing genuine penitence and of allowing the discipline to train the soul and purge it of its sin and train it in righteousness. The older severe ascetic penances were commuted by acts of charity, pilgrimages or crusades - or by the prayers of the particularly holy such as those awaiting martyrdom. These were regulated by Pardoners who could give official church sanction to such arrangements. It's not difficult to see how it became possible to buy your way out of penance – and also how it became extended to the world to come. The medieval development in the understanding of Purgatory saw it as a continuation of the Penitential system on earth and remission of that penance beyond the grave could be obtained in two ways – by invoking the prayers of the particularly holy – the saints above – or by gaining a Pardon from the official church system – those pardons we usually call Indulgences. In the time of Martin Luther the issuing of Indulgences was a lucrative economy and Pardoners were the great moneyraisers or even development officers of their day. Many a church, hospital, leper colony, school, road or bridge was built with moneys collected by the professional Pardoners of the day. Johann Tetzel was the Pope's principal Pardonner/development officer for Germany and the Pope – Leo X – had dreamed up a big project, the rebuilding of St Peter's itself into, in fact, the building we know today. It was commonly said that Tetzel's motto was:

*As soon as a coin in the coffer rings  
the soul from purgatory springs.*

It was provoked by this that Luther wrote his famous 95 theses and supposedly pinned them on the church door in Wittenburg.

In this context it is perhaps not a surprise that the English Reformers in the end concluded:

*THE Romish Doctrine concerning Purgatory [and] Pardons... and also invocation of Saints, is a fond thing vainly invented, and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the Word of God.*

But if the Romish development of the doctrine is to be rejected that doesn't mean that there isn't a more ancient, even Scriptural doctrine that is worthy of attention.

St Paul in our 1 Corinthians reading speaks of a Day when all will be revealed by fire 'and the fire will test what sort of work each has done'. It is true – as Protestant commentators have maintained – that Paul is primarily talking about the specific work of building the church community – this is about people such as me, entrusted with that task. Have we built the household of God, the new Temple, with precious materials – gold, silver, precious stones – or with the cheap stuff – wood, hay and straw? What is the quality of our work? The fire tests the work – the cheap stuff just burns away, leaving only the foundations. The precious materials withstand the fire. So it's true that what's being talked about here is the testing of the work done, not the eternal testing of the one who does it. But Paul goes on:

*If what has been built on the foundation survives, the builder will receive a reward. If the work is burned, the builder will suffer loss; the builder will be saved, but only as through fire.*

So it's not just the building that is tested but the builder. There is a testing by fire for me anyway – I've got to face purgatory, and it is not a great leap of the imagination to think that this might be a test for all of us. To be tested by fire is a purgation; it is to be in the refiner's fire having all the dross burnt out of us, so that what is left is the valuable stuff, the real thing – the gold, the silver, the precious stones.

The church fathers certainly saw this teaching as grounds for at least the possibility that Purgation, that is experiences of hardship that prepare us for heaven, may not end when we die.

Origen wrote:

*"For if on the foundation of Christ you have built not only gold and silver and precious stones (1 Corinthians 3); but also wood and hay and stubble, what do you expect when the soul shall be separated from the body? Would you enter into heaven with your wood and hay and stubble and thus defile the kingdom of God; or on account of these hindrances would you remain without and receive no reward for your gold and silver and precious stones? Neither is this just. It remains then that you be committed to the fire which will burn the light materials; for our God to those who can comprehend heavenly things is called a cleansing fire. But this fire consumes not the creature, but what the creature has himself built, wood and hay and stubble"*

St Augustine wrote:

*And it is not impossible that something of the same kind may take place even after this life. It is a matter that may be inquired into, and either ascertained or left doubtful, whether some believers shall pass through a kind of purgatorial fire, and in proportion as they have loved with more or less devotion the goods that perish, be less or more quickly delivered from it.*

I'm with Augustine. I wouldn't want to go much beyond Scripture. The 20<sup>th</sup> Article says

*It is not lawful for the Church to ordain any thing that is contrary to God's Word written, ... although the Church be a witness and a keeper of holy Writ, yet, as it ought not to decree any thing against the same, so besides the same ought it not to enforce any thing to be believed for necessity of Salvation.*

That's why the title for this evening's sermon has a question mark – Purgatory? Maybe. And, if so, then our praying with and for those who have gone before us, not least in a service such as this, is a loving way of assuring our loved ones that they are not on their own – think of it a little like an Amnesty International group taking the trouble to remember those in prison somewhere and interceding on their behalf. Purgation or Purgatory is not about punishment; it is about love and being prepared to inhabit the eternal home that Jesus has gone ahead to prepare for us.