

The Iceberg

A Sermon for Ash Wednesday, 2008

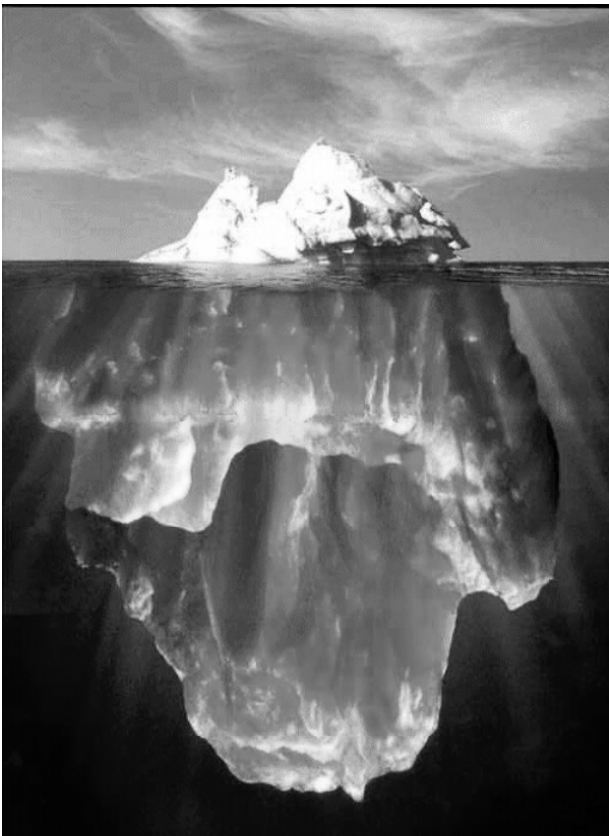
After this sermon, we will hear and respond to the Liturgy of Penitence which will form part of our common prayer this evening. In it we will hear a long catalogue of sins from which we will ask to be delivered, followed by a long list of events in the life of Jesus through which we will pray for the delivery to be achieved.

It is a traditional Litany and an ancient form of prayer that juxtaposes the iniquities of the individual Christian with the suffering and graciousness of Christ. It is a form of prayer which is intended to be humbling and to produce in the worshipper a sense of their own culpability, but not to humiliate or leave with a sense of despair. What the litany produces is a sense of gratitude for the salvation won for us on the Cross, and a desire to amend our lives in the present and future.

One of the phrases used is "from sins of the body and mind...Good Lord deliver us."

Sins of the body and mind.... Sounds a simple enough religious phrase, but it is in fact a devastatingly penetrating thought.

Everyone will acknowledge that they are responsible for sins of the body - although thankfully, most people don't become murderers or major criminals. In our private prayer to God this evening, we will hold our hands up to a variety of activities which we would not wish to continue with. We might be very honest and admit to God a wide variety of such matters.



Similarly, everyone I am sure would be prepared to acknowledge before God that we are prone to thinking bad things, thinking of things which would be harmful to others if they were ever perpetrated.

So far so good. Or should I say, so far so bad?

There is a picture in my mind of an iceberg. The tip above water makes up about 5% of the whole mass of iceberg, including the part beneath the water and therefore invisible.

In our sins of the mind, I suspect that the tip which we acknowledge, even to ourselves, let alone to others, is backed up by a deeply weighty mass of thought-sin beneath the surface of our public exterior.

The pioneering work of Sigmund Freud expressed this in the language of scientific concepts like ego, the conscious and sub conscious mind.

Carl Jung expressed this in the more picturesque language of dreams.

Whatever language you choose, we all know how powerful the reality is. Whether or not caused by trauma or circumstances beyond our control, we all know that there is something deep down in there, deep inside our inner selves which can motivate bad things. It can also motivate good things of course, but the power to perform evil actions comes from the inner compulsions which we all know about, and sometimes are unable to contain.

As soon as we are aware of a particular issue emanating from this mind-sin problem, we need to tackle it head-on. Failure to deal with it can lead to soft but sinful thoughts, then harder wicked thoughts, then destructive words and eventually, wicked actions.

We will all need to deal with these developments at some time in our life. The story of the temptation of Christ is a kind of example of what to do. It is important to confront temptation, the inner sin, and not to deny it exists. There is a need to assess what part of one's own vulnerability is being addressed and then by refreshing one's fundamental faith, to change that vulnerability from a quagmire of susceptibility into a firm footing for resistance. In this particular area of sin, there is a need to go back and look again and again at the roots of faith, the foundations of your life vision, so that the temptation is seen for what it is, a cul-de-sac of human negativity, and not the way forward for a person inspired by the cross and passion of Jesus Christ.

I hope that your Lent will be fruitful and sustaining and that we may all celebrate Easter as a refreshed people of God.

Lent by George Herbert (1593-1633)

Welcome dear feast of Lent: who loves not thee,
He loves not Temperance, or Authority,
But is composed of passion.
The Scriptures bid us fast; the Church says, now:
Give to your Mother, what you would allow
To every Corporation.

It 's true, we cannot reach Christ's fortieth day;
Yet to go part of that religious way,
Is better than to rest:
We cannot reach our Saviour's purity;
Yet are bid, Be holy ev'n as he.
In both let 's do our best.

Who goes in the way which Christ has gone,
Is much more sure to meet with him, than one
Who travels the by-ways:
Perhaps my God, though he be far before,
May turn, and take me by the hand, and more
May strengthen my decays.

Yet Lord instruct us to improve our fast
By starving sin and taking such repast
As may our faults control:
That ev'ry man may revel at his door,
Not in his parlour; banqueting the poor,
And among those his soul.