

4th January 2021

Honesty

“An honest man’s the noblest work of God.”

Robert Burns, The Cotter’s Saturday Night

Resolution 3 – “Be honest”

In 1973, after my theological training, I spent the summer on Iona for the Iona Community’s New Member’s programme, and, in September, took up my post as a Probationer Minister. The norm then was for an Iona Community minister-member to be placed with another Iona Community member for two years to complete their ministerial training, and I worked in Easterhouse in Glasgow with a wonderful man, Rev John Cook. I learned so much from John and the Easterhouse people that has stuck with me through the years – including the importance of honesty.

One Sunday I preached on the text: “Suffer the little children to come unto me and forbid them not ...” It was, to my view, a wonderful sermon, the definitive exposition of a familiar text, delivered in a modern fashion, by a young minister fresh out of theological college. At the end of the service, one of the worshippers asked if she could “have a word”. We found a quiet corner. “It’s about your sermon, son,” she said. “Yes?” I replied in anticipation of a glowing complement. “Well,” she said, “it was rubbish!” I couldn’t hide my disappointment. But she continued, “And it would have been better if ...” and proceeded to reconstruct the sermon, word by word, section by section, improving it as she went.

It was the best seminar in Homiletics I’ve ever had, and it was predicated on honesty. But this wasn’t the honesty of cruelty or vindictiveness, to prove a point or make me feel bad. This was honesty offered in love, to help a novice minister when help was clearly needed.

Honesty is about speaking the truth in love and offering constructive analysis and not hurtful put-downs. And it’s also about seeing the plank in your own eye and not just the speck in someone else’s.

Robert Burns is right. To be honest is to be noble, truly to be what God made us to be. So today, once again, that is my resolution – honestly!

A prayer for today

All-knowing God, if I can’t be honest with myself, how can I be honest with you?

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