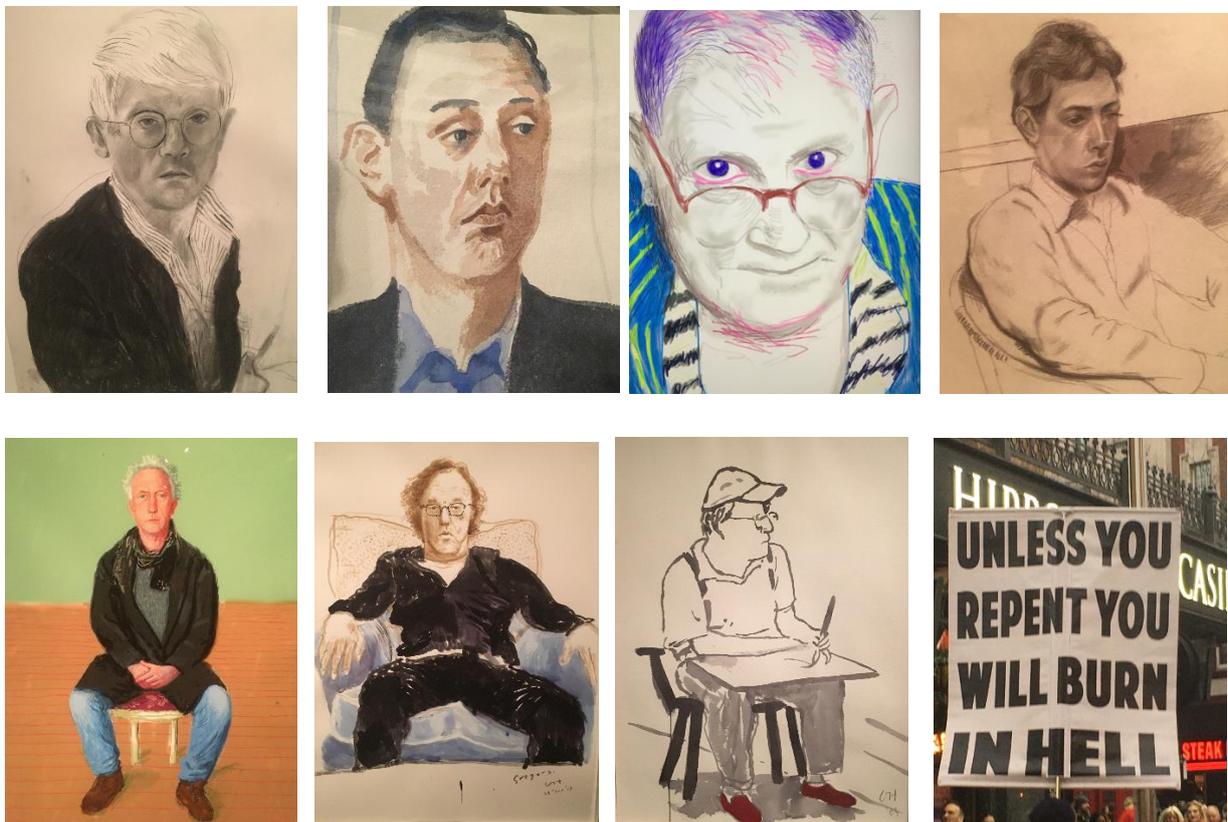


SERMON FOR LENT I at 8am | 01.03.2020

Genesis 2: 15-17, 3: 1-7; Romans 5: 12-19; St Matthew 4: 1-11

Wet and cold as it was, were better, yesterday afternoon, than to make for the National Portrait Gallery and the new exhibition: David Hockney, drawing from life.

Not very well reviewed, Maria and I have a particular interest in Bradford born Hockney whose major works are displayed in the renovated Salt's Mill in Saltaire. He had a large exhibition at the Royal Academy a couple of years ago, but this more modest show was about his craftsmanship in drawing the small group he selected to sit for him.



Then on our way back to the bus - on the corner of Leicester Square – I saw this placard. Now I have a bit of an aversion to Jehovah's Witnesses or the more extreme evangelical preachers you often find in public places. Whatever they are saying – and it is usually tosh – it makes the ordinary work of sharing the Good News of Jesus very much harder. In the public mind, we are all tarred with the same brush.



But this street sign did make me reflect back on the Hockney exhibition: known as a stalwart of the pop art movement, working now on ipads as much as with crayon and pencil, one word kept coming back into my head: vanity. How could anyone, even someone as talented as Hockney, draw himself – day after day – for a month or more? How could he set himself quite so forcibly at the centre of his own world and encourage us to look at not just his skill but on himself?

The stories that we have, from both Genesis and Matthew, point us to the same issue: the Garden of Eden is paradise – the place where a perfect relationship with God was possible. Why? Because the two creatures whose home it was were able to balance perfect beauty, peace and delight – with a natural dependence on God. Now, you say, it was child-like, too dependent, not fully human because they did not have that ethical choice of good and evil, right and wrong, which we take for granted. But it was good, as all creation had been – benign and without any fear or subterfuge.

And there were no mirrors, no opportunity to look at oneself and want for more. It is the serpent who adds that dimension: Satan who introduces the vanity – not of ‘how well do I look’ – but the vanity of thinking that we can find solutions away from the mind and the love of the God who is reaching out to give us a proper sense of ourselves.

But Satan is not done: out in the desert with a hostage Jesus, it is the same temptation to vanity that forms the dialogue: *show your unique ability to turn stones into bread: think what people will make of that!; throw yourself off the top of the steeple for you are so special the angels will not let you get hurt; and if you want power, take the short-cut: come and be on my side...*

Vanity comes in so many shapes and sizes. Hockney is not unique in seeking to want our attention, the world is full of such attractions.

And we do it too and, as St Paul reminds us, it is a killer when it comes to being able to walk unselfconsciously with God. Our ego and our pursuit of what makes us happy leave little room for those walks in the early evening twilight with our God. The mark of vanity is that it seems to provide all the reassurances and comforts that we all seek.

But just read the language of Romans 8, just hear the words St Paul uses: gifts, grace, lavishness overflowing – and righteousness. If we can tear ourselves away from the mirror for a moment, there is something else, something far greater on offer. We can find our way back to Eden, not by what we create in our own image or by what we achieve, but by returning to that relationship of dependence where we know – for sure – that the best things in life come from God and not from us.

***Away from me Satan, For it is written: ‘worship the Lord your God, and serve him only’.* Worship here of course is talking about value: what do we most value? Is it the gaze and appreciation of a fickle public or something much deeper?**

Lent gives us the chance to re-evaluate what is really important. Not of course because we are frightened by eternal hell fire as described in that annoying placard but because we know that vanity cannot give us what we really crave – the reassuring love of a God who would die to save us from ourselves ... and our own vanities.