

## BOOK FESTIVAL SERMON

Preached at Holy Trinity Church Guildford

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By Rev Robert Cotton

Mr Golightly's holiday by Salley Vickers

Reading: selected verses from the book of Job

This is a difficult book to preach about. It is not a difficult book to recommend – it is beautiful, it's lyrical, it's both inspiring and also well-grounded. But I can't say too much about the book as I don't want to spoil it for first-time readers: because there is a 'something' that, if I mentioned it, would take away some rightful pleasure from those who haven't read the book yet. So to them I say (sounding, I think, a bit like a politician) "Trust me. Read it".

But I can't leave it like that so I have to approach the book rather obliquely hoping to encourage you to read and re-read. For it was as I re-read this, two insights that I had in my teenage years came back to me. Neither, as I say them to myself now, sounds very profound, but I was affected deeply by them then; and both of them are signposts that may be worth following. I believe they have a lot in common with *Mr Golightly's Holiday*.

"Life is not a rehearsal." The first school play I ever acted in was 'Macbeth'. I still remember standing in the wings half way through the final performance, having an overwhelming experience of being engulfed by the darkness. This was mainly a deep feeling of sadness because I suddenly realised that this play (which I had enjoyed rehearsing and was enjoying performing enormously) was going to be over. I think this experience was what I would now call an experience of the 'nowness of now'. I had a huge sense that this was a moment and it was going to end. So that reflection – 'life is not a rehearsal' – is about how we can't do, and do over again, so much in life. The nowness of life is vital and vitally important. It is difficult to describe this without pointing to people who don't follow this signpost. You probably know some people who treat life as a drama, or worse, some who treat other people as characters in their personal drama, who are merely playing out a script. When they have exhausted the patience and possibilities of their current friends and it is time to move on, they simply move to find others who will fulfil the same script in their life.

As you read *Mr Golightly*, you will come across quite a lot of the unpleasant characters who seem to be replaying their own script over and over again. I know that I too am vulnerable to making this mistake. How often I have had a new experience saying to myself 'Oh, well next time I do this...!' And 'next time' takes away from the 'nowness' of living now. I believe that Christians can be particularly vulnerable to this mistake because we carry deep within ourselves a pattern, a story of how the world goes: we are created, we live on this earth, and then, in Shakespearean terms, Act 5 is the consummation – heaven. Because we know our end, that can take away from Acts 2,3 and 4. We can be so ready to fit people and ourselves into ready-made roles since we know what happens in Acts 2, 3, and 4. We can live only waiting for Act 5. But how

much that demeans the nowness of life! It's bad theology, it's warped spirituality. As a spiritual director and as a priest preaching on *Mr Golightly's Holiday* I want to encourage you to see what is in front of you, to live in the present, because that is a crucial part of being open to God.

The second insight I had: "life is not a puzzle to be solved". As well as being a lover of amateur dramatics, I was actually a mathematician by training. Therefore I was brought up in a world where it is natural to think of all problems being questions for which there exist answers. But I am now very cautious about that perspective on life. Even if we call them 'mysteries' this word hints at there being some reality behind that which we see. So once again we can be very easily distracted from living in the nowness because all the time we are simply looking for what is behind.

So we come to Job: a virtuous man, yet calamity happens. So he asks the awesome question, "Why?" His comforters know the answer. They have already settled everything not seeing the man in turmoil in front of them. They know that God is just, that Job is being punished, therefore Job must have done something wrong. So they address the question 'Why' only by squeezing facts into their ready-made answer. But that is not Job's way. He begins his search for justice, for answers. Again I would encourage you to read and re-read both the book of Job and *Mr Golightly's holiday* to see how that search develops. What are the protagonists really after? For Job, he moves first from wanting God to let him die (the pain and the sadness is so much he just wants it all to be over), to wanting God to respond. Death is simply not enough. And so there comes that heart-rending moment when Job manages to put into words his deep, deep hope and longing (or maybe it is truly his basic belief) that he is not going to be beaten by ghastly experience. And he cries out, "I know that my Redeemer lives, and one day I will see him face to face". That marvellous moment comes in Job, and in different ways is repeated in *Mr Golightly*: a marvellous sense of presence that is really wonderful and wonderfully real; a sense that there are some moments when we are face to face with God, and God, maybe, is face to face with.... I wonder who.

This is a pattern quite unlike Paul's experience on the Damascus road – a one-off flash conversion. Some people experience life and God like that. But the pattern here is similar to the story about the burning bush. The bush that was real and was really burning and yet was not consumed. It comes in those moments, maybe that you have experienced, when you know the need for words to say something that is beyond words. Or maybe that experience of going on holiday and never quite having the perfect day, never having that moment that is truly satisfying; yet, by the time you get to the end of the holiday, you look back and realise that it truly has been holy and that you have met with your heart's desire.

So look back, read and see, or re-read and see again. Because here is a window through which you will see beautiful transforming grace. There are some people who allow grace to transform and to reveal the wonder, the beauty and the joy of life. Such beauty makes us whole and leads us out to true and godly living.