

## STUDY PAPER THREE

### WHAT DOES HOLINESS MEAN TODAY?

By the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams

In Chapter 17 of St John's Gospel, Jesus speaks, in his prayer to the Father, about "making himself holy" for the sake of his followers, so that they may be made holy as well. In the context, it is clear that this "making himself holy" is tied up with his resolution to face and endure the cross – which is where he will show God's glory and make it possible for his followers to share that glory.

So it looks as though one of the basic things we have to say about holiness is that it is about accepting the cross – accepting what God wants, never mind the cost, so that God's beauty and radiance can come through. And because only Jesus fully accepts the Father's will and lets it happen in him, there is a sense in which you have to say that he alone is really holy and he alone makes it possible for anyone else. When we struggle to let God through in our lives, when we receive the gift that God gives us in the cross of Jesus and try to let that gift be shared with others, we share in however small a way in holiness.

That's why there is always a difference between holiness and goodness; being holy is not the same as being very, very good, because the very good person may not make us think of anything but how wonderful they are. Holy people make us think how wonderful God is – which is why (as has often been said) people who are just good often depress you but holy people make you joyful and thankful!

In a way it's impossible for us to try to be holy – that would undermine what it really means. No, we try to keep our eyes on God and our hearts open; and if we manage that at all, holiness happens without our noticing. It's a strange truth that we sometimes glimpse holiness in people who don't in all ways live very "good" lives – but they have moments in which they let God through by their love or their joy towards him. It doesn't mean that we deliberately break all the rules on the off chance that we might become holy! But it's helpful to know that holiness is a gift and a surprise, not something we can plan and possess.

Questions for discussion:

1. How far is holiness linked to suffering if it is to be linked to the cross?
2. Dr Williams makes a clear distinction between goodness and holiness – can a very good person ever be holy?
3. What are the symptoms by which we can recognise holiness if it is not goodness?
4. How far is it true to say that holiness is only visible in those who are not seeking it?