

Epiphany 1, 2021, Pusey House, the Principal  
The Transformation of our minds by seeking Christ Sorrowing.  
Zechariah 8.1-8, Psalm 72.1-8, Romans 12.1-5, Luke 2.41-end

*And be not conformed to this world; but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind. ... and his mother said unto him, Son, why hast thou thus dealt with us? behold, thy father and I have sought thee sorrowing.*

God is manifest in the flesh, the divine life shines forth. The shining forth of the divine life for us and in us is the dominant theme of the season of Epiphany. Today, it is the Divine wisdom which shines forth. We see divine wisdom manifest in the boy Jesus who is seated in the midst of the doctors, ***both hearing them, and asking them questions***. The Epistle proclaims that this divine wisdom is to be manifest also in the members of our Lord's body, divine wisdom manifest in you and I: ***And be not conformed to this world; but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind.***

How does this happen? There is an important clue for us in the way in which the mother of our Lord and St Joseph find the divine Son – they seek him sorrowing. They seek him sorrowing. This is not just an incidental or happen-chance detail. There is a connection between their sorrowing, and their finding the boy Jesus, the holy wisdom of God. There will be a connection between our search for him, the sorrow we have in this search, and the transformation of our minds.

*The wisdom which is manifest in the boy Jesus is manifest in us when, with His Mother and St Joseph, we seek him sorrowing. We find Christ by a journey which always brings struggle and sorrow. The journey also brings the joy of finding him in whom our soul delights.*

The Gospel for today is not a story about a naughty boy. The divine wisdom in the boy Jesus corrects the imperfect understanding of his Mother and of St Joseph. ***How is it that ye sought me? wist ye not, didn't you know, that I must be about my Father's business?***

Our Lord tells his mother and St Joseph, and he tells us, 'if you had understood the signs which you have been given, you would have known where to find me'.

This shows that the problem is not with the shining forth of the divine light in Christ, it's not a story about a naughty boy. The problem is with us, we need to be led back to Christ. The whole Church needs to be led back to her head, to the boy Jesus.

If we are to find divine wisdom in Christ, we can learn from following the story about how our Lord's mother and St Joseph lose the divine Son: ***But they, supposing him to have been in the company, went a day's journey, and they sought him among their kinsfolk and acquaintance.***<sup>1</sup>

This account offers a kind of description of our losing the Son of God, of our travelling away from him. We start the journey all together. He is with us, we are sure, we have all the signs, and a vibrant faith. But at some point, we discover that our Lord does not appear to be with us. The fault is not with OBL, it is always with us.

In some way, this sense of our Lord's absence is a description of the way we can travel away from the place where he is to be found. This can happen to individuals, and it can happen to a collective, or to some part of our Lord's body, the Church. It happens, for example, when

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<sup>1</sup> One might reflect here on the way in which looking among those who are most familiar, who are nearest to us, by blood or acquaintance, is not a guarantee of finding divine truth.

we presume his presence and blessing. We started out with him, grateful, but now we demand his favour. We may not have noticed that we are no longer walking in the good works which he has prepared for us to walk in, until suddenly, he is not there. Sin is a way of describing what it means to leave our Lord behind, to walk in our own paths.

Thank God that we experience pain and sorrow when we discover OBL is not with us, or, more accurately, when we realize that in some way we have turned our back on divine grace and favour. Thank God for this sorrow.

How do we find our way back to the divine wisdom in Christ? How do we find the light we need to illumine our path?

***And be not conformed to this world; but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind.***

Before I say more about the role of sorrow, let's think of one example of this struggle with conforming to the world. It is often suggested in the heated debates of our day that appealing to truth is really a veiled expression of power. There is no truth, this view goes, only systems of oppression or consent which must be exposed and destroyed. The disciple of the Christ Jesus will be attentive indeed to claims of injustice. But the disciple of divine wisdom will also be suspicious about the rejection of truth. Long before Marx or Nietzsche, Freud or Foucault, it is Pontius Pilate who utters the phrase 'What is truth'? Even when it is not intentional, the rejection of truth is a vote for a world where power rules, where power trumps justice. This is the world where the loudest scream wins, and where there is no perspective in which the whole is known and loved, no reconciling communion of love in which we can all share. 'What is truth' are the words which give up our Lord to be crucified by the mob. This is very important. We are not to be conformed to any discourse which rejects the truth we find in Christ, the truth which gives life, the truth which knits all things together, the truth which overcomes both sin and resentment the truth which heals and restores.

On the other hand, there is something profoundly Christian, profoundly wise, in the exposure of the way in which power and other forms of un-love or injustice corrupts truth. We need to be attentive to any possibility that the banner of truth becomes a shroud to hide different forms of corruption or un-love. The truth which we find in Christ always comes with goodness. St Paul unites the call 'be not conformed' with the call to grow in holiness and goodness: ***therefore, ... present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God.*** If we wish to find our way back to the divine wisdom, we will seek to grow in divine goodness. To give up on truth is to give in to a world ordered by power, to be captive to endless politization. To neglect goodness is to make truth not a banner inviting us to life, but a shroud over a dying faith.

'Be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind', that we may together find the divine wisdom, that we may be held together in that reconciling and 'perfect will of God', that we may be 'members one of another' in the risen body of Christ.

What is the place of sorrow in this transformation of our minds and lives? If sorrow helps to lead us back to Christ, then we certainly have enough sorrow these days to help us to find Him. But what kind of sorrow?

What changes distress or pain or frustration into the sorrow that leads back to the divine wisdom is repentance. Repentance is this turning back to Christ. In the prophets which we have been reading at the daily offices for some time, upheaval and suffering is always an invitation to consider if we have left the divine light behind, if we have left the secure paths to choose a way that leaves behind divine guidance. This is not to blame us in any direct way for the suffering which comes from the Covid-crisis, or any other particular trial. The sorrow we feel is real, it's not to be just pushed aside. But if we are seeking the divine wisdom and

love, we will also discover what parts of our sorrow come from being attached to the wrong things, where our sorrow is connected with leaving the divine wisdom behind. If we turn back to look for Christ, we will discover what is out of order in our lives, as well as where he is already.<sup>2</sup> T. S. Eliot describes the place of sorrow in our search for what we need, but do not have, in the Four Quartets, in East Coker:

To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not,  
You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy.  
.... the way of ignorance.  
... the way of dispossession.  
You must go through the way in which you are not.  
And what you do not know is the only thing you know  
(I've give his words more fully in the notes to this sermon in case you would like to explore them.)<sup>3</sup>

The trials of the moment are an invitation to each of us to turn back to Christ, not just in repentance, but also in hope. We can face our current trials in hope, we look together toward the bright light which radiates from the Divine Son.

We may expect to find our Lord in his temple, His Father's House, in the place of worship – not only there or here, but certainly here. We don't need to be afraid of our questions and doubts, or of the sorrow which comes with looking for the light we need. The divine wisdom, the boy Jesus, will listen to us with the same attention he gave the Doctors. His attention is His love.

Today, with BVM and St Joseph, we are invited to look for Christ, to accept the anxiety and sorrow which comes with this search. We face our trials, and we make this search in hope, because we are confident that the divine wisdom wills to be found by us, to come home with us, even to make His home in us. He wills also to grow up in us, in wisdom, and in stature, in favour with God and knit together with the *many members of the one body*.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> It's important to see that it is the boy Jesus, Jesus who has not grown to fulness of human stature, who is lost. The events of the Gospel are not just stories about Him, they are stories about us. We should not be surprised that before Christ has fully grown up within us, before he has fully taken possession of us, that he may appear to be lost to us. We find ourselves in the situation of the bride in the song of songs, 'I sought him whom my soul loveth: I sought him, but I found him not. I will rise now, and go about the city in the streets, and in the broad ways will I seek him whom my soul loveth' (Song of Songs 3.1-2). The experience of the saints through the ages has been that there are times when Christ seems lost to us, and the only way to find him is with a kind of struggle and anxiety. The sorrow which comes from knowing that we have in some way left divine wisdom behind, that the boy Jesus is absent from us, this sorrow can be part of what leads us back to the divine wisdom. This is true for us as individuals, and as a church.

<sup>3</sup> T. S. Eliot East Coker, III

To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not,  
You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy.  
In order to arrive at what you do not know  
You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.  
In order to possess what you do not possess  
You must go by the way of dispossession.  
In order to arrive at what you are not  
You must go through the way in which you are not.  
And what you do not know is the only thing you know  
And what you own is what you do not own  
And where you are is where you are not.

<sup>4</sup> With the shepherds and the magi we hasten to Bethlehem to rejoice in this shining forth. This morning, we find ourselves again in Bethlehem, in the House of Bread, we come to the House of the sacramental Bread of Life. We come to where our Lord chooses to be found and adored.