

Trinity 4 The redemption of our bodies and lives, in patience and in love.  
The Principal, Genesis 3.17-19, Romans 8.18-23, Luke 6.36-42

*For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now.*

*JESUS said unto his disciples, Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful*

You've noticed no doubt that these past weeks the colour of the chapel has changed from gold to green. Green speaks to us of our growth in Christ, the blossoming of the gifts of the spirit in us. Trinity season is the long green season of our growth in love. Last week, I described these early weeks of Trinity season as a journey into love, we are drawn into the love of Father for the Son, of the Son for the Father, we are drawn by the cord and bond of Love, God the Holy Spirit. We don't just see this love, or follow it, we are called to inhabit it.

This love is like a great building, our Father's house, which, as much as we can see it, dazzles, comforts, and inspires us. We discover that this love has a definite architecture, contours, and a shape. This love is not first a feeling, though we hope to be changed so that our feelings and affections will follow in the course of this love. Not all our loves fit in the building, and so growing into this home requires transformation and pruning. The journey into love is sometimes a journey up steep hills or through thick brush. The fire in the hearth of our Father's house warms us, the fire gives light, but when we turn our back to this divine fire, we know the same love of God as what we describe, in human terms, anthropomorphic terms, as anger. What we call the divine anger is a description of the uncomfortable and potentially awful experience of turning our back on the divine goodness. When we say the confession together, we are being invited to turn back again toward the love of God.

Last week I also described love of God as relentless. This love seeks us, follows us, and does not turn away. God's love is constant, even though we turn away from it, deny it, mock it. God still loves.

The Gospel invites us to step into this love, to live in it, but not just for ourselves, but for others:

*JESUS said unto his disciples, Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful.*

The goodness of God does not just pursue us – that would be depressing. To be confronted with a goodness which could only judge us as insufficient, that would be a source of discouragement, not hope. In the Lord Jesus, and on the cross, God bridges this great gap. Our Lord Jesus takes on himself the power in all forms of turning away from him. On the cross, the Lord Jesus carries the burdens of our falling short and our rejection, he breaks the power of sin. And so in the Gospel we are not confronted with an impossible force. Rather, the Lord Jesus speaks to us as those who no longer live for themselves, we are born again, born from above. The principle which animates all created things is also the principle at the core of who we are, and so God of love speaks to us as Sons and Daughters: *Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful.*

St Paul's letter to the Romans which shows how this invitation paints a big picture for us. This invitation is not only addressed to humanity, but to all created things, all that has emerged overflowing from divine fecundity, all things are being restored and drawn to God. This big picture also helps us to live patiently with the pruning and transformation of divine goodness being born and growing up in us.

First, the big picture. Thomas Traherne matriculated at Brasenose College in the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. A poet and theologian, Traherne sees the whole of creation groaning and travailing, manifesting the love and goodness of God. In Traherne's words:<sup>1</sup>

‘You never enjoy the world aright, till you see how a [grain of] sand exhibiteth the wisdom and power of God;

[You never enjoy the world aright, till you see and] prize in everything the service which [all things] do [for] you, by manifesting His glory and goodness to your soul.

Wine quencheth my thirst, but to see it flowing from his love, who gives it unto man, quencheth the thirst even of the holy angels.

Your enjoyment of the world is never right till every morning you awake in Heaven: see yourself in your Father's palace; and look upon the skies and the earth and the air, as celestial joys.

You never enjoy the world aright ... till you love men so as to desire their happiness, with a thirst equal to the zeal of your own; till you delight in God for being good to all.’

Traherne's vision is inspiring, stunning, but it could almost be depressing. The world is not only a mirror of infinite beauty – it can be ugly and dangerous. The same world which manifests God's goodness can also kill us, starve us or drown us. The orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart argues that it is fundamental to Christian life that we develop the capacity to see the world in these two ways. In his words:

‘... the Christian should see two realities at once, one world (as it were) within another: one the world as we all know it, in all its beauty and terror, grandeur and dreariness, delight and anguish; and the other the world in its first and ultimate truth, not simply ‘nature’ but ‘creation,’ an endless sea of glory, radiant with the beauty of God in every part, innocent of all violence.

To see in this way is to rejoice and mourn at once, to regard the world as a mirror of infinite beauty, but as glimpsed through the veil of death; it is to see creation in chains, but beautiful as the beginning of days.’

What makes it possible to see these two worlds, one within another?<sup>2</sup> We see the world as it should be seen by ‘the cultivation of charity, of an eye rendered limpid by love’, and eye rendered pure and clear by love, an eye from which the beam has been plucked and removed.

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<sup>1</sup> ‘You never enjoy the world aright, till you see how a sand exhibiteth the wisdom and power of God; and prize in everything the service which they do you, by manifesting His glory and goodness to your soul. Wine quencheth my thirst, but to see it flowing from his love who give it unto man quencheth the thirst even of the holy angels. Your enjoyment of the world is never right till every morning you awake in Heaven: see yourself in your Father's palace; and look upon the skies and the earth and the air, as celestial joys. You never enjoy the world aright till the sea floweth in your veins; till your spirit filleth the whole world, and the stars are your jewels; till you love men so as to desire their happiness, with a thirst equal to the zeal of your own; till you delight in God for being good to all. The world is a mirror of infinite beauty, yet no man sees it. It is a temple of majesty, yet no man regards it. It is a region of light and peace, did not men disquiet it. It is the paradise of God.’ Traherne, *Centuries of Meditations*, quoted in Bentley Hart, *Doors of the Sea*, p 56-57.

<sup>2</sup> The world on the surface as a visible sign of a spiritual promise and reality, a sacramental vision. Here Bentley Hart's instructions bring us back to our journey into love. What makes it possible to see the inner essence of a created thing, the divine seed or logos which is a gift of the divine Word and logos by whom all things are made, is the same divine charity and love which we seek.

Some people look on the world with hope, despite all the struggles and trials which face us as individuals or as a community. Others might say that they don't want to bring children into this world because the world is so messed up. This is to see the world only in part, to see the world drained of God.<sup>3</sup> To be without hope for the world or for ourselves is to be blind to work of God. St Paul's description of the world as groaning and travailing is an image which brings together both the dreariness or anguish in the world, along with the hope that the goodness and grandeur is at the beginning and the end of all things.

What does this mean in terms of our growing into love? Our lives are also a groaning and travailing between two worlds. I've heard the message -- ***And this is his commandment, That we should believe on the Name of his Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, as he gave us commandment.***

This is a beautiful message. I want to love my brothers and sisters. I know that pride, putting myself in the place of God, or putting my needs at the centre of things, is destructive. I've heard the message, I've accepted it. But, oh dear, this is not so easy. When I feel crossed or hurt, anger wells up within me. When something happens which upsets me, all my desire to put on humility drains away. I want to love freely and purely, but I am capable of being attracted by things which are perverse and impure. I've heard the message, but by habits and inclinations are not co-operating, and these habits and inclinations are also part of who I am. St Paul describes what we know to be true: ***even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for our full adoption as sons, even the redemption of our body.***

We may be inspired by beauty which we see in the face of the Lord Jesus, we may embrace the truth which sets us free, but we are not pure will or pure intellect, we are not angels. We have bodies, histories and habits which shape us. For the love of God to be worked out in us is a matter of time and trial, of patient striving and suffering, and seeking, and more patience still, ***we groan within ourselves ... waiting for the redemption of our body.***

Bentley Hart's description of how a Christian can see the world, a sea of glory, the paradise of God, but also a place of violence, despair, and anguish, offers a way to see ourselves, and God's work in us.

Do we struggle with the difficulty of growing up in love? We ought not to despair, the struggle is an essential part of our formation in love. We are two worlds also. We have been born anew, the principle of divine love has been implanted in us. The Holy Spirit has been shed in our hearts, the Divine Word, the Son of God lives us in.

And we are a work in progress, our affections are often in conflict with divine goodness. We have the divine light, and yet we do not see with this divine goodness and love. The sins which we cannot see, and which we don't want to leave behind, the beams which are in our own eye, these prevent us from forgiving and loving. We are invited to bear in our lives the consequences of someone else's rejection of love and goodness, that is what forgives asks of us. We do this as those who know that our Lord Jesus has borne in his body the consequences of our lack of love. It is a work of love and patience for this to be worked out in us.

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<sup>3</sup> *First Things* podcast, editor Mark Bauerlein, 17 June, 2021. Professor Peter Kreeft joins the podcast to discuss *How to Destroy Western Civilization and Other Ideas from the Cultural Abyss*. Kreeft sees the decision not to have children because of the troubles in the world as an expression of a deficiency of hope and faith in God.

St Paul sketches a big picture, and suggests how this big picture enables us to face our daily struggles in hope, in patience, with an eye made clear and pure by love.

I attempted, much more clumsily, and without the same pure clarity, to do something similar last week when I evoked the Church of England report *Living in Love and Faith: Christian teaching and learning about identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage*.

The question I asked is how the commandment to believe God and love one another might inform the *Living in Love and Faith* project. In the words of the authors of the book, the *Living in Love and Faith* project ‘takes readers on a journey that begins with reflections on God’s gifts of life, relationships, marriage and learning. A survey of what is happening in the world with regard to identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage, [all this] is followed by an exploration of how Christians are to understand and respond to these trends in the light of the good news of Jesus Christ.’

Or, in the form I put it last week, how then does the commandment to believe God and to love one another shape our whole lives as well as our understanding of ‘identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage’? I drew on work of a catholic theologian to describe what the *Living in Faith and Love* book characterises as the normative or classic response to this question.

That is, in the universe described by St Paul, in the kingdom described in the teaching of the Gospels, the union of bodies is meant to go along with the union of lives for the whole of our lives, that the intimate union of bodies it belongs to the marriage of the bride and the bridegroom till death they do part. In the words of *The Book of Common Prayer*, God who made all things out of nothing also makes marriage to be a sign of the ‘spiritual marriage and unity betwixt Christ and his Church’.

This is the view which I have been led to hold and to try to teach. It is of course not just my view, it is the view which expresses the Church’s reading of the Scriptures and the voice of the Spirit in the Church. If this classic view is the teaching of the Gospels, it is put before us as a gift, a way for all of us to flourish, to grow up in Christ, to be drawn together into a redeemed community, a heavenly city ordered by love. For many today, and this is what inspired the *Living in Faith and Love* project, what might be called traditional view seems incomplete or imperfect, and needs to be change. Indeed some parts of Anglican communion have already changed taken a different path, and this is part of argument and divisions within the Anglican communion and the churches more generally today. You don’t need me to describe this.

I too have been challenged and changed by my encounter with the struggles which *Living in Faith and Love* invites us to take on. In particular, I have been challenged by the voice of many involved in the Living in Faith and Love project, or commenting on it, about the way in which the modern Church has made an idol out of marriage and what might be called the traditional family, and the confusion and hurt this has caused. They have pointed out that the bridegroom of the Church, the one who shows us the most clear and beautiful picture of human flourishing, lives among as a single chaste man, as well as the bridegroom of the Church. Of course, I speak as a fool, and speaking so briefly means that all these statements are even more limited and confused than my own ignorance would make them. Perhaps more especially, bearing in mind the Gospel of last week, there are Pharisees on all sides of the discussion.

We are dealing not just with principles, but we hold each other's lives in our hands. *Living in Faith and Love* is not a work of abstract theology, it was commissioned to address painful struggles and disagreements about how divine love shapes all of our relationships. If we think that the discussion is not about us, that we are not in this together, we are in danger of turning our backs on the character of divine love and goodness. Before God's love, we are all redeemed, we are all the recipients of gift and grace, we are all, each of us, in need of God and of one another.

Even as I described last week the way in which my own questions were stopped short by the address of the Lord Jesus to me and to all of us in the Gospel for last week (Luke 15.2-3), it is obvious to see that these questions cannot be addressed in the detail they demand in a sermon. In the autumn, in Michaelmas term, we will have the chance for more full consideration of the Faith and Love Project. We have had discussion groups on challenging subjects in the past, and by God's help, we may be given grace to come to this one in a way that is enlightening and life-giving.<sup>4</sup>

But what is important to say in this sermon, is that we are invited to day to see the struggles of our lives, of our groaning and travailing in love, in a big picture which gives us confidence and hope. We are also given a serious warning. Our Lord warns us, he warns the Church, he warns us personally, that the growth of love in us is often perverted and cut short because we tolerate the beams of unlove in our eyes. What is so disturbing about this warning, is that we do not see these beams. We have grown accustomed to them, and so we remain blind. It is the work of divine love to reveal this to us, often working in the life of the Church, through our friends, sometimes through those who don't seem to like us very much. Our Lord addresses each of us with a warning which is part of the invitation to grow up in love. Let's not miss it.

We are not angels, we are not pure intellect and will. The love which we have seen in Christ, the goodness which has inspired us, must also be worked out in our bodies, in our habits, in our past, and in our future. Christ does not come to us as pure spirit, He comes to us in the body, Incarnate, fully human and fully God. And so today the Word of God addresses us in human words and sounds. The Son of God gives himself to us in human form; He loves us in the body. In the sacrament of his body and blood He comes to live in us, in his body. Yes he comes in a spiritual body, but a body which brings all his history and habits, his physicality, to dwell with us and in us. Let us come to the Holy Communion seeking that his love, manifested and given in his body for us, in his life in teaching, in his death on the cross, and in his glorious resurrection in the body, that by the mysteries of his body and blood, he will shape his love in us, that all our groaning and travailing may be a journey to praise and worship, that we may all together dwell with Him and He in us.

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<sup>4</sup> In this as in other difficult question, the Scriptures and the voice of Christ in the Church address us. There is a debate over that that Word speaks in our current circumstances. But even then, we only understand in part. To know and hear goes along with having our hearts transformed by love, and goodness, as well as all the rigour of serious theological investigation. Whenever the divine Word speaks to us, we understand only as we step out beyond our capacities – as we step out in faith and in love, in obedience and humility. But we also need to be able to think what we are taught, to connect the struggles we face with the big picture of God's purposes for us. Divine commands may also be translated in terms comprehensible and intelligent to the essence of love.