

Epiphany 3, 23 January, 2022, Pusey House
The Restored Palace, The Principal
2 Kings 6.14b-23, Romans 12.16-end, Matthew 8.1-13

And Jesus put forth his hand, and touched him, saying, I will; be thou clean. And immediately his leprosy was cleansed.

Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.

Last week, Father Mark drew on Evelyn Underhill, English theologian and spiritual guide, to describe the goal of our Christian life, the end which the shining forth of Epiphany enables us to see. The goal of prayer, of our disciplines, of our Christian pilgrimage, 'is Union with God. But what does that mean? It means every bit of our human nature transfigured in Christ, woven up into his creative life and activity, absorbed into his redeeming purpose'.¹

But how are our very human lives woven into Christ's creative life and activity? How are we 'absorbed into his redeeming purpose'?² The transformation that the miracle of water

¹ Evelyn Underhill, *Light of Christ* The Christmas mystery has two parts: the nativity and the epiphany. A deep instinct made the Church separate these two feasts. In the first we commemorate God's humble entrance into human life, the emergence and birth of the holy, and in the second its manifestation to the world, the revelation of the supernatural made in that life. And the two phases concern our inner lives very closely too. The first only happens in order that the second may happen, and the second cannot happen without the first. Christ is a Light to lighten the Gentiles as well as the glory of his people Israel. Think of what the Gentile was when these words were written – an absolute outsider. All cozy religious exclusiveness falls before that thought. The Light of the world is not the sanctuary lamp in your favorite church.

... let us try to learn a little of the height and breadth and depth of his love – and then apply it to our own lives.

Beholding his glory is only half our job. In our souls too the mysteries must be brought forth; we are not really Christians till that has been done. "The Eternal Birth," says Eckhart, "must take place in *you*." And another mystic says human nature is like a stable inhabited by the ox of passion and the ass of prejudice; animals which take up a lot of room and which I suppose most of us are feeding on the quiet. And it is there between them, pushing them out, that Christ must be born and in their very manger he must be laid – and they will be the first to fall on their knees before him. Sometimes Christians seem far nearer to those animals than to Christ in his simple poverty, self-abandoned to God.

....

When you don't see any startling marks of your own religious condition or your usefulness to God, think of the baby in the stable and the little Boy in the streets of Nazareth. The very life was there which was to change the whole history of the human race. There was not much to show for it. But there is entire continuity between the stable and the Easter garden and the thread that unites them is the will of God. The childlike simple prayer of Nazareth was the right preparation for the awful privilege of the Cross. Just so the light of the Spirit is to unfold gently and steadily within us, till at last our final stature, all God designed for us, is attained. It is an organic process, a continuous divine action, not a series of jerks. So on the one hand there should be no strain, impatience, self-willed effort in our prayer and self-discipline; and on the other, no settling down. A great flexibility, a gentle acceptance of what comes to us and a still gentler acceptance of the fact that much we see in others is still out of our reach. We must keep our prayer free, youthful – full of confidence and full of initiative too.

The mystics keep telling us that the goal of that prayer and the goal of that hidden life which should itself become more and more of a prayer, is "union with God." We use that phrase often, much too often to preserve the wholesome sense of its awe-fullness. For what does union with God mean? It is not a nice feeling we get in devout moments. That may or may not be a by-product of union – probably not. It can never be its substance. Union with God means every bit of our human nature transfigured in Christ, woven up into his creative life and activity, absorbed into his redeeming purpose, heart, soul, mind and strength. Each time it happens it means that one of God's creatures has achieved its destiny.

² However, the divine light does not just shine forth in Christ – he comes down and goes up that the divine light might shine forth in us. During this season, the reading from the Epistle often serves as a practical working out in us of the glory we see revealed in the Gospel.

Last week, Father Mark also pointed out that the way the Gospel events are situated in time is a kind of manifestation. So, the great sign of transformation, water into wine, human into divine, takes place not just in Cana of Galilee, but on the 3rd day. The miracle of transformation takes place on the day of the resurrection,

into wine promised last week in the first miracle, in the paradigmatic miracle, at Cana of Galilee is presented in the Gospel miracles for today.

Today we have one of the few Gospel readings during the year with two miracles. This is not an accident, these two miracles are closely connected. These two miracles display the 'already' and the 'not yet' character of the Christian life. Christ has come down, the prince of peace has come, his great work has been accomplished, the leper is cleansed, and we have been made sons and daughters of God.

And yet, we seem so far from our destination, sometimes stuck or paralysed, sometimes agitated or distressed. We still face wars and rumours of wars, we have been made whole, and yet we live with ravages of sickness and disease, love has been shed abroad in our hearts, and there is still a lot in our hearts that is not wise or good.

We have been healed, and we are being healed.

We have been justified, made right with God. At the same time we are growing in grace, Christ is growing up in us in wisdom and stature, we are being sanctified. The Divine life shines in Christ that it may shine in us.

In both miracles put before us today, faith is the organ which sees the glory in Christ. Faith is a response to the glory which is seen or glimpsed, and it is a means of transformation. In faith, our humble 'yes', our humble acceptance of Christ's faithfulness, we know that we have been made whole. In faith, our humble 'yes', our humble acceptance of Christ's faithfulness, we know that we are being made whole.

And, behold, there came a leper and worshipped him, saying, Lord, if thou wilt, thou canst make me clean.

In the same way that the changing of the water into wine is a miracle which sums up the transforming work of the bridegroom of the Church, so is the healing of a leper a paradigmatic miracle. We encounter this miracle now, here at the beginning of the cycle of all of the miracles of transformation, because it has a special significance. The histories of the Old Testament and the strict regulations of 'the law of Moses' make leprosy to serve as a kind of sign of reality and consequences of human sin. In the Bible, leprosy pictures the spiritual illnesses which afflict all people, however healthy we appear to be. Leprosy is a picture of human nature which needs to be healed to be 'woven into Christ's creative life and activity'.

And Jesus put forth his hand, and touched him, saying, I will; be thou clean.

Our Lord's good will goes before, He is already there waiting to meet our need.

and it is the resurrection made present. So today, the Gospel is also given an important time stamp. These miracles happen 'WHEN he was come down from the mountain'

The divine life shines forth in Christ, in the great events we celebrate this season, and in the miracles which we contemplate. In the Magi, the world comes to Christ to discern his glory, to adore. In the Baptism of Christ, He is revealed to be the divine Son – the three-fold dynamism of the life of God, complete in itself and creative, the Father, the Son, the Spirit is manifest to our sight, or perhaps more especially to our worship. The water made wine is not just the first miracle, it is the paradigmatic miracle, 'which points to our human nature being transfigured in Christ, woven up into his creative live and activity'

when he was come down from the Mountain where he taught the people, blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the meek, forgive, not everyone who says to me Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will... people astonished at his teaching... does not just teach, he accomplishes his teaching in us]

And immediately his leprosy was cleansed. And Jesus saith unto him, See thou tell no man, but go thy way, shew thyself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses commanded, for a testimony unto them.

The man knew what the priest was supposed to do, but probably most of us are less familiar with the book of Leviticus. This is one of those places where if we pause to learn what our Lord commands, it is like following a map to buried treasure.

Leviticus 14 describes how the priest ‘takes for him that is to be cleansed two birds alive and clean, and cedar wood, and scarlet [yarn³], and hyssop’.⁴

For the first Christians who contemplated the ceremony described in Leviticus, all these elements spoke of Christ:

Cedar wood is fragrant and not liable to corruption, an emblem of Christ who saw no corruption.⁵

The scarlet wool is an symbol of the blood of the sacrifices, of a symbol of life. The wool points to the blood of Christ which cleanses, makes whole, redeems, gives peace. The hyssop is a small bushy plant, used in rituals of purification to sprinkle water: *purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean.*

And the priest shall command that one of the birds be killed in an earthen vessel over running water: ⁶As for the living bird, he shall take it, and the cedar wood, and the scarlet, and the hyssop, and shall dip them and the living bird in the blood of the bird that was killed over the running water: ⁷

And he shall sprinkle upon him that is to be cleansed from the leprosy seven times, and shall pronounce him clean, and shall let the living bird loose into the open field.’

The early Church heard all of this as a description of what Christ does in the Church. The two birds, one put to death, and one alive and set free, pictures Christ, ‘because **One Christ was in death and above death**’⁶ In the words of Cyril of Alexandria: ‘As far as He was man He endured death, but in that He is the Life He conquered it’⁷

Or, in the words of Theodore of Cyrus, ‘our Lord was crucified in His humanity for the moral leprosy of the world; and His human flesh suffered death, while the Godhead united itself to the suffering of His humanity’⁸

³ ESV translation

⁴ Lev 14.3-7: ‘And the priest shall go forth out of the camp; and the priest shall look, and, behold, if the plague of leprosy be healed in the leper; ⁴Then shall the priest command to take for him that is to be cleansed two birds alive and clean, and cedar wood, and scarlet, and hyssop: ⁵And the priest shall command that one of the birds be killed in an earthen vessel over running water: ⁶As for the living bird, he shall take it, and the cedar wood, and the scarlet, and the hyssop, and shall dip them and the living bird in the blood of the bird that was killed over the running water: ⁷And he shall sprinkle upon him that is to be cleansed from the leprosy seven times, and shall pronounce him clean, and shall let the living bird loose into the open field.’

⁵ Cedar is an emblem of Christ in both Leviticus and in Ezek 17.22-23. See Christopher Wordsworth, Commentary on Leviticus.

⁶ ‘He was put to death in the flesh, and was quickened by the Spirit’ (1 Pet. iii. 18).

⁷ St Cyril of Alexandria, *Glaphyra on the Pentateuch* (vol 1), on Leviticus, in C Wordsworth, Commentary on Lev.

⁸ Theodore of Cyrus (393 – c. 458/466) sees here a symbol or ‘type’ of the Passion: ‘We see here a type of the Passion. As one of the birds was killed, and the other, having been bathed in the blood of the slain bird, was set free, so our Lord was crucified in His humanity for the moral leprosy of the world; and His human flesh suffered death, while the Godhead united itself to the suffering of His humanity. As the leper was made bright when sprinkled with the blood of the slain bird, mingled with living water, with cedar, hyssop, and scarlet, so he who believes in Christ our Saviour, and is washed with the water of Holy Baptism, is cleansed from the spots of sin. The cedar represents the incorruptibility of Christ; the oil poured on the right hand, foot, ear, and

The blood of the bird mingled with running water in which the living bird is dipped pictures the water of baptism. We are cleansed and dipped in divine life in the same waters of baptism. The fragrant wood of the cross, the blood of Christ, the purity of God, the life giving Spirit, are all there in the ceremony in the book of Leviticus, and these things are ingredients and parts which go together in Christ's work now in our lives.

The priest did not heal the man, but he performed a ceremony which declared that the man was healed. The ceremony is a prophecy, a picture, a shining forth of the work of Christ. Christ accomplishes what the ceremony signifies, so the ceremony helps us to see the work of Christ now.⁹

In these brief comments we only begin to explore the riches of the treasure of Christ. The point here is not to work out an elaborate code, to give a simplistic way of reading: the living bird equals the divine nature, the running water equals the water of baptism or the work of the Spirit.

Of course, we are invited to see these connections, but we are also invited to see that the work of Christ is not arbitrary. Christ steps into our world and into our lives, he breaks in, he comes down. At the same time the wisdom and goodness of God also seeks us and is manifest to us from within the order of things. Our Lord is already always seeking us from within, within the world, within our lives.

The cleansing of the leper is the first miracle, because it is the miracle of our new birth in Christ. It pictures baptism even if this work of healing is not limited to baptism. Christ's life is communicated to us when we are dipped in the running water made alive with the blood of Christ and the Spirit of God. This work has been accomplished, it has happened, and it can never be taken from us. It is also a present reality, we have been healed, we are being healed. This new beginning is renewed when together later in this service or privately, we confess our sins and ask to be made whole. This healing is renewed at the sacrament of the Holy Communion, it is renewed by the work of the Spirit in us day by day.

The second miracle put before us today speaks to us especially of this present work of transformation, of how the 'not yet' is worked out in us. The second miracle helps us to live the faith of the centurion while we wait for our lives to be 'transfigured in Christ, woven up into his creative life and activity'.

The way we use the centurion's words week by week give us one way of reading this passage. '***Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldst come under my roof; but speak the word only, and /my servant // my soul/ shall be healed.***'

head, signifies the consecration of all our members to God's service. The leper was to be without the camp ; the impenitent sinner is to be put out of the Church.' (Questions on Leviticus, 19.)

⁹ As he so often does, the Venerable Bede in his commentary on this passage sums up the tradition for us: 'This man typifies the whole human race, for he was not alone a leper, he is described in the Gospel of Luke as being full of leprosy. *For all have sinned, and do need the glory of God* (Rom 3.23), that glory whereby, in putting forth the Hand of the Saviour, that is, the Incarnate Word of God, and touching human nature, all men are made clean of the wound of the primeval error, so that they who were for so long considered as unclean, and cast forth from the camp of the people of God, now being at length restored to priest and temple, can offer up their own bodies as a living sacrifice to Him, of Whom it was said, *Thou art a priest forever.* (Ps 105.4)'⁹

In these words, we treat the centurion and his servant as one person.¹⁰ In this way of reading the passage, the centurion is the ruling principle of his soul, his faith, the command centre which is both at one and distinct from the servant who is suffering.

Surely we recognize this. On the one hand, we may have a sense of what we are called to do. On the other hand, 'My servant [my body, my will] lieth at home sick of the palsy, grievously tormented'. We may clear about we want or not, and still find ourselves stuck, immobile, unable go forward. We may recognize how good and necessary it is to overcome evil with good, and yet we may feel worn down by the evil. Or, we may recognize, we may have a definite sense or experience of the peace which comes from being a daughter of God, a son of God, and yet at the same time, we may be 'grievously tormented'. We may know or trust in one part of our soul that all will be well, and yet at the same time we may be worried, or tormented with anxiety.

The faith of the centurion is a faith which receives Christ's good purposes from afar. The centurion does not need the confirmation of Christ's physical presence to receive what he has to give. We use the centurion's words to express out trust that the one we cannot see with our eyes or hear with our ears, or really and truly present to our faith, to the faith of the centurion in us. The centurion's words teach us to recognize the healing power of Christ in the sacrament of the Holy Communion. The centurion's words also teach us to recognize Christ who comes down from the mountain to us by His Holy Spirit. He is always coming down, always seeking to work out his good purposes for us, even when we do not feel, or see, or sense his presence. He is especially active when we seek him in prayer, or when we seek him in actions which manifest his life in us.¹¹

Our Lord praises the centurion's faith, and it may be one of the hardest aspects of faith to live with the lack of wholeness we experience and feel. In part, this is what it means to 'be not wise in our own conceits', 'not to be wise in our own sight' (ESV). True wisdom does not have its centre or anchor in us, but in God. If we look at the surface of things only, we may not see the work of God, Christ working deep within, Christ working from afar. We have been made whole, and we feel like our lives are in broken up in different parts. We have a share in Christ's righteousness, and there is a to which is not righteous in us, and we're not sure even that we want to choose or embrace the good we see. By faith we may see the Glory of God in Christ, Christmas, but still find it hard to see the glory of Christ in us, his people, Epiphany.

The miracles today encourage us to take heart. We can hope to overcome evil with good, because our Lord has overcome evil in us with his good, which is much greater than whatever is not good in us. At the same time, the second miracle teaches us to expect the hard trial of faith – we come again and again back to Christ, waiting for what he has given to be completed and perfected in us. The centurion's faith invites us to join our faith with his. Our faith is our humble 'yes', our humble acceptance of Christ's faithfulness, we know that we have been made whole, and in the same faith, we know that we are being made whole. The miracles today invite us to make the centurion's words on our lips with renewed faith and trust. We will find Christ in the sacrament of the Holy Communion, and we will find him working in us and with us in the trials of hopes of each day.

¹⁰ Some interpreters read the word for servant in this passage as 'son', 'my son lieth at home', and this reading emphasizes a kind of oneness.

¹¹ This way or reading the passage has some obvious problems. I am suggesting that the centurion's faith helps us to wait for Christ to work his purposes out in us over time. In the miracle, the servant is healed immediately, from the self-safe house. We can see the immediacy of this healing as a clear testimony of Christ's will do heal. However, if makes sense to see in these centurion and his servant or his son different aspects of one person, different parts of our own lives, then it makes sense to see the miracle is showing us how we are made whole over time.