

"The simple truth is that hardly any one ever changes, because it is a slow and agonising process, and because in the end most people don't really *want* to - they want to escape the consequences of being who they are, whilst continuing to be just how they are now. But this *can* not be true for us. Our local 'assemblies must become academies of life as it was meant to be'... in which we are *trained* in godliness, in which flawed selfish ordinary people are turned into the fellowship of the burning heart - the very Body of Christ." (adapted from Dallas Willard)

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit...

The Lady is not for turning.

There have been very few phrases in the recent history of British politics that have captured the public imagination quite like that line, penned by Sir Ronald Millar, and delivered, as from the very depths of her being, by the then Prime Minister, in her famous speech to the 1980 Conservative Party Conference.

The Lady is not for turning. Part of the reason for its enduring impact is that it can be taken *either* as the ultimate expression of resolute determination - and therefore *applauded*; *or* as the ultimate expression of stubborn recalcitrance - and therefore condemned. It can be taken up, in other words, as a rallying cry for both her *supporters*, and opponents alike, and so it has never been far from the lips of *anyone* discussing the Iron Lady ever since. And there should be no surprise that the same definitive statement, *can* be taken in two completely different ways - its topic practically demands such ambivalence - because it is a statement about turning.

Whether it is a turn up for the books, or one good turn that deserves another; the turn-off of being turned down, or the treachery of a turncoat - the whole point of the word turn, in all the contexts we deploy it, is that it is ambivalent - it faces in two directions at once - or rather, it can point in *opposite* directions...by turns.

It is no good arguing whether a turnstile or a turn pike is a place of entrance or exit, of admittance or refusal, because it is by definition both: a turning *point* at which the course is determined. Are you going on? Or going back? Are you in? Or out?

And it is for the very *same* reason that there should be no surprise about the ambivalence we find, continually punctuating scripture as a whole, and the Gospels in particular. Is God a god of liberty or prohibition? The one who rescues his people from a foreign land, or exiles them to one? Is the Angel for us or for our adversaries? Is Yahweh the God of a chosen few, or of 'every nation and tongue'? Is Christ the fragrance of life, or the stench of death? Is the Gospel wisdom or folly?...

Is it the message of a grace so wide that it encompasses those from East and West, and North and South, in its gift of love? Or of a gate so narrow that we must strive - literally agonize - to squeeze through it? Does it's brilliant light blind, or bestow new sight?

Scripture is punctuated with this ambivalence, because scripture is a catalogue of turning points, and turnstiles. Or rather, it is the same pivotal moment revisited repeatedly, the *same* turning point approached from innumerable *different* directions.

And what is more, it is a library of *stories*, and part of what defines stories like these - as it does the fairy tales and novellas which are their secular counterparts - both in terms of their structure, and of their purpose - is what Tolkien called 'The Turn':

Not just the fulcrum in the plot, upon which the character of the hero, or heroine, tilts; but how what is told recalibrates the life of the one who hears it.

Such is the essential ambivalence of these turnstile moments, that Tolkien invented for them the word 'eu-ca-tastrophe' - good destruction - "the place", he said "where joy and sorrow are indistinguishable - reconciled...as selfishness and altruism are lost in love". And he described the *ultimate* example of them, as *being* the crisis provoked by encountering the death and resurrection of Christ - which we celebrate in this feast - in our eucharists; and, in theory at least, in our lives.

So it is that today's feast has been marked *out* for special *attention* by the church across the centuries. This is a celebration of the turn - of conversion - the calendars only explicit celebration of conversion. Not of *martyrdom*, not of death; not of birth or conception, not of a life entire, but of that point in the story that is death *and* birth, that which *redefines* a life, transforms it - the eucharastrophic moment - the kind of comprehensive turning about that must follow from finding yourself on holy ground, in the presence of love in all it's glory...face to face with God.

Like Abraham, like Jacob, like Moses, like Joshua, like Isaiah, like John Baptist, and now like Saul, of course, but ultimately like *everyone* that finds themselves, in Paul's own words, gazing with unveiled face on the glory of the Lord, and being transformed into the same image from glory to glory." Because the Christian life is a process of transformation, a catalogue of turning points, and turnstiles, AND it is *so* precisely by *being* the same pivotal moment revisited repeatedly, the same cross in the road, the same moment of epiphany, the same revelation, the same light revealed in the person of the risen crucified one.

And so it is, that so much of our language and imagery *here*, is that of 'good destruction' and 'life through death'. Our faith is grounded and worked out in metanoia - the turn of repentance - and it is not just our *scriptures or our stories* that are a catalogue of turning points - our liturgy is, inevitably, similarly punctuated: We begin, or end, by enacting the turning point of the annunciation; we centre our ritual on the turning point of the cross; the priests turns time and again to reflect the two-way conversation which flows around the central tenet of the incarnation; and *we* are, *in* turn, entirely turned about, by receiving the sacrament, and by the procession of the Gospel.

Something, sometimes, we're a bit reluctant to do...

Here, our gospel procession stops in the centre reflecting that idea of the same turning point approached from innumerable directions, but just down the road at St Barnabas, the Gospel processes all the way to the *West* end of the church, and it has always interested me that of all the ceremonial actions required of those taking part in the Mass there, the one that consistently brings people to question, or object, is the complete about-face that is consequently performed as the Gospel is brought out.

It interests me, because it's hard to think of a more physically *appropriate* response to the Gospel of 'the last become first' - of God made Man, and Man taken into the Divine - than for it to turn us *entirely* around - given that it's unrealistic to expect everyone to do a somersault, or a handstand, which might be *equally* suitable embodiments of what encountering the Gospel involves.

But it also interests me because, in our texts and in the event we commemorate today, as in the Gospel in general, we are confronted with *another* kind of ambivalence and contradiction - one that seems to centre on this very question of reluctant turning.

If this faith is one of conversion - of the REVERSAL OF OUR DEEPEST AFFECTIONS AND MOST BASIC ASSUMPTIONS - if this Gospel is a Gospel of transformation - if the foundations of the New Jerusalem are not only those sovereignly chosen by God, but those chosen by him who have

chosen to give up everything in order to become part of his Son's cruciform life...then why do so few Christians appear to be significantly more Christlike in their conduct towards one another after 5, 25, or even 50 years of faith?

How can the world *seem* at least, to be *less* peaceful, less loving, less just, less devout, than it did before the converting power of the Spirit of God was poured out upon all who believe?

Or perhaps more significantly, given that transformation - particularly the inside-out kind demanded by Christ - is an extremely difficult thing to *measure* in anyone *else*. The more telling question is: Why am I still so much conformed to the pattern of this world, after 30 years of faith, and not more transformed by the renewing of my mind?

In the life of St Paul, even if he found himself crying out at that which remained *un*-changed in him, the turn is manifest. Why is not more visible in the church as a whole? In Christians in general? In me in particular?

Well. It's not for want of turning, so much as for want of *being* turned...

Whether in *this* kind of expression of church - were we turn and turn about repeatedly as part of our liturgy, where we express our penitence and need of God's converting power, in Kyrie and confession, in Gloria and in Agnus Dei; or in an entirely *different* expression of church, which emphasises the kind of turning provoked by music that causes you to weep at *your* sinfulness, or God's forgiveness; or by the sort of *preaching* that brings you frequently to the front in conviction of sin, and your need of healing. In both sorts of churchmanship there is plenty of turning to Christ. And in *both* contexts this turning is *crucial*, sacramental even - part of the whole to which it points...

But it *is* only *part*.

As repeated chastening passages in the New Testament make clear - being exposed to, even receiving the word of God; giving voice to praise, prayer or penitence; calling him 'Lord, Lord...even casting out demons in his name', these may *bring* us to the turnstile - may even be the very *movement* of the turnstile, the crucial engagement with the question of going forward or going back - but "the gate is small, and the way is strait that leads to life, and only a few of those seeking it find it".

So if it is transformation of ourselves, and of our world, that we are *truly* seeking, then neither one about-face, nor any number of symbolic expressions of our desire to turn, will suffice in themselves - any more than a *desire* to walk on our hands, or turn a somersault, will result in much other than falling flat on our behinds.

This is revolution we are talking about. This is *turning* of the kind that gave rise to our word turn in the first place - the turning of wood on the lathe, the turning of a pot on the wheel. Turning as in being *turned into* something else, the process of transformation that is discipleship. So Paul, the scales fallen from his eyes can say: imitate me, present your bodies as a living sacrifice - one not tied to the altar - but perpetually offering itself - by refusing the world's patterns... by the continual renewing of our minds...by learning to let our attitudes be as that of Christ...by being changed by degrees into his image...by sharing in his sufferings...

We bring our gifts to the altar and they are turned around - transformed to be given *to* us, so that the same might happen *in* us. But *that* transformation happens by way of the cross, that is the pivotal place of exchange, and that is the ever narrowing way of life we are being called to train ourselves in, or to submit ourselves to *being* trained in.

Because here is the crux of it all. The turning of Christianity is inherently ambivalent, because it is something we do, we *must* do, by being honest about our shortcomings - by confession and repentance; and it is something we *cannot* do, something that is done *to* us by the gracious working of the Holy Spirit. At the same time, crucially, it is something that reconciles both these categories, by demanding that we actively pursue disciplines that will hold us in the place of turning, keep us on the lathe, as his character is carved into us, and our true nature is revealed beneath all the damaged wood.

There is no time to discuss this morning, what those disciplines might be - Our Lord seems content to have us begin with prayer, and fasting, and alms giving in secret - but finding them; finding those things which will function as wheel and water, or lathe and chisel, in the hands of God for *us*, is the key to the narrow gate - the only expression of the desire to change that actually *reflects* a desire to change.

And seeking them out - practising them determinedly - ought to be our most urgent task...

Because The Lady may not have been for turning. But the Lord unequivocally is. And there is no following him through the narrow gate without it.

"Our local 'assemblies must become academies of life as it was meant to be'... in which we are trained in godliness, in which flawed selfish ordinary people are *turned* into the fellowship of the burning heart - the very Body of Christ."