

"Finally he spoke: This is the oracle of Balaam - of the man whose eye is opened. The oracle of him who hears the words of God, And knows the knowledge of the Most High, Who sees the vision of the Almighty, who is falls prostrate, yet has his eyes uncovered...." (Numbers 24)

"Am not I your donkey, upon which you have ridden ever since I became yours unto this day? Was I ever accustomed to do so unto you?" As an Englishman, it is hard not to love the narrators of some of the Bible's greatest stories. There is a delightful understatement in the way they portray the most extraordinary events. It's just a trick of language and culture in translation, of course, but "And God saw that it was good" can sound, to an English ear, an awful lot like "So that's nice"... And here in today's Old Testament lesson, we are introduced to...a talking donkey, of all things, in the driest and most matter of fact manner. And what's more *when* the donkey speaks it is to ask a question - with an air of indignation, and a 'what's got into you?' tone: "Am not I your donkey, upon which you have ridden ever since I became yours unto this day? Was I ever accustomed to do so unto you?"

And where we might expect a startled and even more indignant response from Balaam:

"Well to be honest I'm not sure you are - and you jolly well *aren't* accustomed to doing this - if by this you mean engaging me in conversation! So, frankly, I find myself wondering if any of this this is the world as I know it. To be honest it's all so strange and unreal it's hardly surprising I've resorted to violent rage."

Or words to that effect. Instead he simply replies. "Er...No."

As readers we know what he is actually encountering is something far stranger, and far more real than the (already) fantastical notion of a talking donkey. But the first *sign* for Balaam that his ordinary vision is *lacking* in some way, is the sight of something - a speaking beast - so *peculiar* that it seems to belong to fairy tale or myth, not the workaday world. And the moral of his story is that he finally comes to see, *not* this strangeness but *what* this strangeness is itself revealing, and that as a result he comes to be an entirely changed man. One who finally falls prostrate yet with his eyes uncovered...

If you follow, as we do, the Church's oldest lectionaries, something peculiar happens to *us* as we cross the threshold into Lent, or perhaps better travel through the threshold which *is* Lent... Suddenly it seems, in the readings of the last few weeks, we **TOO** find ourselves in an alien, even phantasmagorical world of demons and spirits, angels and devils - as though, just like innumerable characters *from* story and myth, at the beginning of *their* adventures and quests, we have had our eyes opened to a realm ordinarily hidden from our view. Which, I imagine, is exactly what the old sages constructing the Lectionary had in mind. Not simply that we, with Christ, should enter the wilderness - go beyond the edges of the map, where there be monsters - and just for a season frequent, even in our imaginations, the wild spaces where demons roam, but that away from the light pollution of our built-up realities we might find space to glimpse distinctions between light and dark, and figures lurking in the shadow, which have been lost to our (everyday) sight.

In fact, it is never the case, whatever the town planners might want us to believe, that all that is strange or evil dwells on the outskirts, or beyond the pale, but rather that those things which are found daily in our midst can be most clearly and brutally *encountered* in those marginal places where civilising veneers are stripped away.

Take a walk through the most feared parts of any city and what you will find is not all the bad parts of that city's life pushed to the margins, but all the hidden parts of that city's life writ large.

And so in the Lenten wilderness we are led like Balaam to open our eyes not to the odd or unbelievable, nor to weird or alarming cosmologies, but to that which such things so strange to us reveal - stranger realities still, actually shaping our own lives, and to be discovered right in front of our noses (or our asses).

But if Lent *is* to provide us opportunities for being led beyond the familiar, for the Spirit to take us by the hand and lead us through streets we might normally avoid, show us things that will make us change our minds... If Lenten disciplines, whether fasting or prayer - by their temporary refusal of what is readily in reach, in favour of something as yet unseen but nonetheless at hand - *are* designed to train our mystic sight so that like Daniel and Moses, Elisha and eventually Balaam our eyes might be opened: What is it that we are learning to see?

In this story it is the presence of God, and the will of God, that Balaam is being led to 'see aright'. And in the constant prayer of the apostles for those, like us, maturing in faith - these same two things are held together as being most highly sought after: recognising the presence of God - specifically in Christ - and discerning his "good pleasing and perfect will". Learning to discern, in other words, the difference between right and wrong, good and evil - and not just in the extreme test cases of wilderness encounters, but in the ordinary...

That is the thrust of Paul's message to the Ephesians: Learn, in your day to day behaviour, to discern God's presence and will - to distinguish between good and evil, light and dark.

The trouble is that whilst nothing could be more stark than the ultimate differences between the light and the darkness - although they are obviously, in one sense, mutually exclusive - determining where one begins, or the other ends is a task too subtle for the likes of you and I. Despite our constant demonising and idolising, our actual ability to identify that which is of God, and that which is not; that which is good for us, or for others, and that which is not, is permanently vexed by the complexity of our lives - by the 'mixed-ness' of it all...not least of our own hearts...Things, people, even actions simply don't divide neatly into good and bad. There is always a constant demand on our vision - our ability to see, to pick out, the precious from the worthless - and it constantly requires from us both a studied *effort* to see, and an acknowledgement that ultimately only *God can* see - can judge - what is wheat and which are tares.

And although these complementary attributes - of humility and growing insight - are exactly what Lent can cultivate in us, it is important to recognise that it does so by a very particular process - and perhaps not the one to which we are accustomed.

When Jesus in our Gospel story is confronted by the *ultimate* failure to discern the presence or will of God - those who mistake his power for the work of Beelzebub - he responds by, amongst other things, making a peculiar assertion about the dangers of casting out devils, only to find they return to an empty house in greater numbers.

It is an odd interjection. But perhaps it points to the process by which our eyes are to be opened through Lent, and in our following of Christ.

It seems from what he says, that when it comes to ushering in the kingdom of light, getting rid of what is 'bad' cannot be the real focus. Rather it is filling the space with what is good that is key.

So by the same token, learning to see what is of God cannot - perhaps must not - be based on simply trying to remove from our sight what we consider not to be (of God). Rather it must be about sharpening our focus on that which is good - among the mixed economy of all we encounter - fixing our minds on "whatever is true and honourable, and right and pure and lovely"...

When Bank Officials are trained to spot counterfeit notes - to distinguish between what is really valuable and what is not - their vision is exercised, not by comparing the real and the fake, but by focussing repeatedly, in detail, and continually, on the *real* notes. So that they can immediately recognise something that does not quite fit their pattern when confronted with it...

So it is with Lent and the training of our vision. If we presume it to be primarily an exercise in getting *rid* of those things which we now perceive as ungodly - if it is *only* a question of pushing them to the margins - we might find we have learnt little of the "new and precious seeing", Quinquagesima called for at the outset of Lent, by the time we reach its climax in the veiling and unveiling of Passiontide.

If we allow ourselves to buy the idea of Lent as merely some kind of chocolate free diet, then not only will the cake we banished from sight as fleshly temptation most likely return with seven of its friends to fill the empty spaces, but we will have missed the principle it is seeking to instil in us, and equip us to practice with ever increasing proficiency:

That we are to be transfigured by opening ourselves to the light. That the darkness in us - all that is hateful in us or others, is not to be hidden away in shame, or dragged out into the open in judgement, but exposed and expelled by our learning to look steadily upon, and consequently by our untarnished reflection of, the One who is light, as he steadily pours out the love of God by His Spirit in our hearts.

There are two ways to remove sediment and grime from a bottle. One is the scraping and shaking and sweeping and garnishing that Jesus reveals as worse than futile, the other is simply the continual filling of the vessel with pure water, the constant overflowing that is preparation, protection and final fulfilment all in one...

In the end, if we think Lent is simply screwing our eyes shut against the alluring or alarming visions which might distract us from the Divine, then we may find before long we are flogging a dead horse or a dilatory donkey.

But if we make the first duty of Lent to develop our ability to recognise that which is of God - by actively looking for it even in the most unpromising of people and places; by seeking to concentrate on whatever is true and honourable, and right and pure and lovely - all that is of the light - in even the darkest of experiences; and if we use this time to first and foremost fix our gaze on the *one* place we can say *unequivocally* that which is good, that of God, is sure to be found - namely in the person of Jesus, and the cruciform pattern of his self-giving, then, like Balaam, we might find ourselves, through the strangeness of this season, being changed into those "whose eyes are opened, who hear the words of God (and keep them), who know the knowledge of the Most High, who see the vision of the Almighty, who falling prostrate, yet have their eyes uncovered...", who see and partake in the burgeoning of the new creation...

And *that*, as a Biblical narrator of the Original Creation might say, would be...good.