

Lent 2, Pusey House, GDW 'More and More': Being made ready, in humility and love, to receive the Love of God poured out and into our hearts.
Jeremiah 17.5-10, Psalm 25.13-end, 1 Thessalonians 4.1-8, Matthew 15.21-88

WE beseech you, brothers and sisters, and exhort you, by the Lord Jesus, that as ye have received of us how ye ought to walk, and to please God, so ye would abound more and more

This sermon will have three parts. In the first, I want to us to consider something of the 'more and more' which St Paul seeks for us. Secondly, I want to look at what the epistle says about obstacles to receiving this super-abundance, and, third, to consider how the Canaanite woman guides us to the more and more, the wholeness which is the promise of the Gospel.

So, first, where are we headed, what is the more and more which St Paul prays for us? Let us remember where we have been these last few weeks. ***Then Jesus took unto him the twelve, and said unto them, Behold, we go up to Jerusalem, and all things that are written by the prophets concerning the Son of Man shall be accomplished.*** The pilgrimage of Lent is a pilgrimage toward and into the Passion of Christ, up to Jerusalem, the place from whence we come and the home to which we return. What is our destination? It is the Love which is poured out on the cross and the love which moves the sun and stars, the good fire which burns within us, both pursuing us and drawing us on, the love which beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.

The 14th century English mystic, Walter Hilton, brings these two images together, the journey to Jerusalem and the vision of the divine love:

Jerusalem is as much as to say *sight of peace* and stands for contemplation in perfect love of God, for contemplation is nothing other than a sight of Jesus, who is true peace.

We can recall here the blindness of the disciples in response to our Lord's invitation to go up to Jerusalem. To see the love displayed there, our vision must be healed. Whatever we know of this love, of the passion to Christ, is but a small part of the infinite depths of the divine goodness.

Then if you long to come to this blessed sight of true peace and to be a faithful pilgrim toward Jerusalem - even though it should be that I was never there, yet as far as I know - I shall set you in the way that leads toward it.¹

The work of Lent is not to shrink us, to whither us, to give us grey lives, but to detach of from those things which weigh us down, which get in the way of receiving the more and more which God wills for us. In his commentary on the verse, 'We shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is', St Augustine describes the character of this journey, a journey of desire more than a journey from place to place:

The whole life of a good Christian is an holy desire. Now what you long for, you do not yet see: howbeit by longing, you are made capable, so that when that has come which you may see, you shall be filled. For just as, if you would fill a bag, and know how great the thing is that shall be given, you stretch the opening of the sack or the skin, or whatever else it be; you know how much you would put in, and see that the bag is narrow; by stretching you make it capable of holding more: so God, by deferring our hope, stretches our desire; by the desiring, stretches the mind; by stretching, makes it more capacious.²

¹ Hilton, *Scale of Perfection*, II, 21.

² Augustine, Homily 4 on 1 John

‘...So God, by deferring our hope, stretches our desire...’. In Lent, the sack of our souls, the sack of the body of Christ, is stretched so that it is capable of holding more.

The first lines of the Epistle describe this enlarging of the soul, the pilgrimage of the soul: *as ye have received of us how ye ought to walk, and to please God, so ye would abound more and more*. Or, this could be translated, ‘as you received from us how you ought to progress and so please God, you may excel, you may abound more and more’.³ The ‘more and more’ here is first a description of the human response, but this abounding ‘more and more’ is the outward and visible expression of the ‘more and more’ which is first poured in.

Second, what gets in the way? What makes love stop short? That too is laid out in the epistle: *For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication; [from sexual sin] that every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honour; not in the lust of concupiscence*. What is the problem with sexual sin, why does it get in the way with our sanctification?⁴

Last week, Fr Mark helped us to see that the purpose of the wilderness of Lent is ‘the unveiling of temptation’. The Spirit which drove our Lord into the wilderness after his Baptism drives us into the wilderness on our way to Jerusalem with Him. The temptations which we face would ‘stop us arriving at the thing we were made for, to stop us entering into the eternal life of love, by offering us illusory ways to guarantee it for ourselves, without dependence on God or any reference to others.’ ‘The most dangerous decoy is the almost-perfect-nearly-true that characterises the snakes appeal to the woman. We were supposed to be like God - more even to become part of the Divine Life - and we did end up knowing good and evil, but not quite in the way Eve was led to understand either of those things’.⁵

When St Paul exhorts us to learn how to possess our vessels in sanctification and in honour; not in the lust of concupiscence, in a kind of self-seeking passion, he is warning us to avoid obstacles on our journey to Jerusalem, not to let our desire fall short of the goal which alone can satisfy it, that for which we were made.⁶ The person who engages in what St Paul describes as self-seeking passion is letting their desire fall short. One of the oldest prayers in marriage service helps us to see this. It gives us words to pray to God who ‘hast consecrated the state of Matrimony to such an excellent mystery, that in it is signified and represented the spiritual marriage and unity betwixt Christ and his Church’.⁷ Marriage in this description serves as a sacramental sign which participates in some small way, which points in a very imperfect way, to the love of God for his people, the love of Christ for the Church, who not only gives his life for the Church, but nourishes and cherishes it.

Lest this sounds like an exaltation of marriage, as if a married couple could have a gift which the single do not, imp to say that both witness of Bible and tradition suggest that a

³ This translation connects the pilgrimage to Jerusalem with the three-fold movement of purification, illumination, union.

⁴ It is important to beware here of the background of dualism. The charge of dualism is often laid at door of Christianity, the view the bible or theology crushes life of the body in the name of life in the spirit. There is a great confusion here: the view of human life which we find in the bible emphasizes the union of body and soul—what we do with bodies shapes our souls, in words of Bulgakov, we discipline the flesh in Lent to receive and beautify our bodies.

⁵ Mark Stafford, Sermon, Lent 1, 2017

⁶ St Augustine describes us as ‘wanderers in a strange country determined to return home’.. But the beauty of the country through which we pass, and the very pleasure of the [journey]’ can become an obstacle, so that we get stuck on the way (DDC). ‘Whatever you hear, see or feel that would hinder you on your way, do not willingly stay with it, and do not tarry for it, taking rest; do not look at it, do not take pleasure in it, and do not fear it; but always go forth on your way and think that you want to be in Jerusalem. For that is what you long for and what you desire, and nothing else but that; and if men rob you, strip you, beat you, scorn you and despise you, do not fight back if you want to have your life, but bear the hurt that you have and go on as if it were nothing, lest you come to more harm.’ Walter Hilton, *Scale of Perfection*.

⁷ BCP Marriage Service

single life offers possibilities for a higher way, not a lower one. The single life offers a more direct approach to the Bridegroom of our souls, Jesus Christ.

What St Paul is criticising is a kind of love which obscures the sign which ‘signifies and represents the spiritual marriage and unity betwixt Christ and his Church’, or, in terms of the love which is our goal, which make the love which bears all things look the love which hangs around for a little while, maybe a wonderful little while, but then is gone, not a love which hopes all things. A love which does not have the character of permanence cannot serve as a sign and communicator of the divine love. Marriage serves as a mystery, a sacramental sign, because in it the gift of our bodies is part of the gift of our whole lives. Like God’s relationship with His people more generally, marriage is a covenant relationship: commitment to the relationship has a priority over one’s passing feelings or even needs. It is because of this this sacramental character, this permanence, ‘for better or for worse, for richer or poorer’, that a covenant relationship may reveal and nurture the kind of love which endures all things, hopes all things, believes all things, which does not fail.

The heart, says Jeremiah, ‘is deceitful above all things’: what counts as commitment can conceal a consumer relationship, I give myself to you totally until you cease to fulfil my needs, or until I feel compelled to look for an upgrade. St Paul is saying that a lack of integrity between the promise of the complete gift of ourselves with our bodies and the complete gift of ourselves with our whole lives, damages the soul, it does not stretch the mouth of the sack wider to give more and more, but teaches us rather to expect less and less. One woman described this as feeling like she was on ‘a never ending audition’ to be her partner’s wife.⁸ Well, since this is only the second point, I will stop here before I say anything really controversial.⁹

Finally, the third point: what does the Gospel teach us about receiving the super-abundant life of the Spirit, about abounding more and more? Another way to ask this would be to ask how does the Gospel address the blindness which makes it difficult to see the love which is our goal, the love which pursues us, and the love which burns within and draws us deeper into the mystery of the passion.

In the Gospel account, we find our Lord in the north, at the border of Israel or just into the region of Tyre and Sidon. This is not just a geographical detail, it speaks to us of the geography of the spiritual life. Last week emphasized that the journey to Jerusalem passes through the wilderness. Today, we see how what is worldly is converted, or how what is outside is brought inside.

The woman who comes to Jesus is ‘a woman of Canaan’: people of Canaan are the old enemies of the people of Israel, they worship other gods, their social and religious life is ordered by other principles: they represent temptation. But here, today, we learn a necessary lesson from this woman, she becomes our teacher. She is in the Gospel like Jacob, the one who wrestles with God, the weaker who prevails in a spiritual struggle against the stronger, or better put, the one who prevails with the stronger.

⁸ Timothy Keller, ‘Love and Lust’, Sermons Podcast. The image of ‘sex as marketing’ and some of the ideas in this section come from Keller. Karl Barth argued that “coitus without co-existence is demonic” (CD, III/4). Some writers have seen in the Canaanite woman’s daughter and the devil which possessed here an extreme example of the consequences of the sins of which St Paul warns us in the epistle.

⁹ It is important to see that what the new testament says about the integrity and unity of the human person, body and soul, about ‘possessing our own vessel [our bodies] in sanctification and honour’, about the ordering of our loves so that we can see in them something of the divine love, that all this was fundamentally at odds with the culture of the day. One of the surprising aspects of our own day, w/n Church and w/t, is how cultural conformity can be presented as a kind of radicalism.

Three times in the Gospel, Jesus deals with a woman in a way that shocks us. First he ignores her. Now notice that while he ignores her, he does not send her away. It is the disciples that want her dismissed. Next he reminds her of the harsh reality, he is Son of David, she is enemy of sons of David. His mission is first to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. She kneels before him, refusing to give up, her stubborn faith, her hope against hope, will not let him go, ***Then came she and worshipped him, saying, Lord, help me. But he answered and said, It is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it to dogs.*** This seems terribly harsh, she is to him like a dog, with no claim of human fellowship, no recognition of the image of God. The woman continues, making what seems like rejection into basis for prayer, what Martin Luther called 'a master stroke, snaring Christ in His own words', in, it must be said, a snare which he lays and chooses for Himself: ***And she said, Truth, Lord; yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table.***

One aspect of our Lord's delay, is that he is stretching the sack, the sack of her soul, of our souls. They must be widened and enlarged to receive the 'more and more' which our Lord wishes to give. How is she enabled to receive this more? When the woman makes our Lord's words comparing her to a dog her own, she is saying something profound about the life of grace: 'Truly with God, we are children, not by nature, but by grace; and so without God and without grace, we are as brutes. "Man being in honour, hath no understanding, but is compared unto the beasts that perish."' ¹⁰

The most fundamental truth about us is not that we are unworthy, but that we are made in God's image, by God, for God. This also means that we can do nothing independent and entirely our own to earn God's love. For people used to proving themselves, looking for a higher grade, a better mark, and better performance review, this is hard to grasp. Or, to put it another way, we don't have a consumer relationship with God, we are not on audition, we don't need to sell ourselves. Before any of that, God reaches out toward us. But receiving this promise means also abandoning before God all claims to our deserving. Before the all-pure, perfect, surpassing perfections and love of God, I am a dog, I am unworthy, and I can say that with thanksgiving and freedom because in saying it I find my feet moved from the shifting sands and slippery surface of a consumer relationship with God to the relationship of a son or a daughter. In giving up all independent claim, we discover that God has claimed us. In theological language, this is called justification by faith. Our Lord's delay to the woman's prayer appears to be the way by which he leads her and leads us to this gift which passes our understanding.

The 14th c. mystic, Walter Hilton, to whom I referred above, who gives a road-map for our pilgrimage to Jerusalem, unites the humility of a saving faith with being made able to receive more of the love of God: 'Humility says, I am nothing; I have nothing'. Again, this is not to say that we are worthless, because God's love has given us a worth that cannot be taken away, but that I have nothing of myself, independent and mine, all mine, to claim, it is 'the humility that the soul feels though grace in seeing and considering the infinite being and wonderful goodness of Jesus' ¹¹. In Hilton's words:

Humility says, I am nothing; I have nothing. Love says, I desire only one thing, and that is Jesus. These two strings, well-fastened with mindfulness of Jesus, make good harmony on the harp of the soul when they are skilfully touched with the finger of reason. For the lower you strike upon the one [The string of humility, the 'I am not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy table'], the higher sounds the other [The string of love, the 'more and more' of 'blessed are all they who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb']; In the same way think that

¹⁰ E. B. Pusey, Sermon X from *Parochial Sermons, Vol. II. Oxford, 1853*. Second Sunday in Lent (Preached at St. Saviour's, Leeds, Lent, 1851).

¹¹ Hilton, *Scale of Perfection* Book II.21.

you have nothing, but are like a vessel that always stands empty, as if with nothing in it of your own for however many good works you do, outwardly or inwardly, you have nothing at all until you have - and feel that you have - the love of Jesus. For your soul can be filled only with that precious liquor, and with nothing else; and because that thing alone is so precious and so valuable, regard anything you have and do as nothing to rest in, without the sight and the love of Jesus. Throw it all behind you and forget it, so that you can have what is best of all.¹²

The woman, like Jacob, wrestles with God and prevails, she finds the yes of God for her and for us in what appears on the surface to be a 'no', In Luther's words, her faith 'grasps and holds the deep and secret yea beneath and above the nay', Let us make this saving healing faith our own this morning. This is the same sacramental faith which finds our Lord here among us, 'which gains and captures him' in his own word of promise, in the signs of bread and wine.¹³ Then Jesus answered and said unto her, answers us, speaks to the Church which is our Mother: ***O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt. And her daughter was made whole from that very hour.***

¹² Hilton

¹³ Luther in Barth, CD 1/1/ p. 202-3. The sermon was preached on Lent 2, and is published in Luther's *House Postil*.