

This sermon - like all sermons - is only saved from being an utter a waste of time by that most unlikely miracle, the one that turns words into flesh and blood. Wit, wisdom, truth even, will not suffice. "For I know that most people — even those who are very clever indeed - can very seldom discern even the simplest and most obvious truth if it be such as to oblige them to admit the falsity of conclusions they have formed... on which they have built their lives."

Tolstoy's pessimistic view of our capacity to digest and metabolise truth, essentially concerns itself with our *mental* facility for self-deception, but the truly worrying aspect of his observation is that it doesn't go far enough. Because the intransigence he has encountered, in himself and others, is in fact written into *all* of the cells and fibres our being - it is not just in our minds, but in our bodies - individual and communal.

In the 2006 book "The Happiness Hypothesis", the psychologist Johnathan Haidt re-articulates St Paul's frustration at his "body of death" which causes him to do the things he does not want to do, and prevents him from doing the good things he does want to do. Haidt expresses this tension by adopting a striking metaphor. "The mind may be divided in many ways", he says, "but the division that really matters is between our conscious/ chosen processes and automatic/implicit ones, and the two parts are like a rider on the back of an elephant." The rider may spend most of his time guiding the elephant to where he wants it to go, but should fear, or hunger, or curiosity motivate the elephant to rush in a different direction, not only is there nothing the rider can do to stop it, but also this distressing experience is likely to reveal the even more distressing possibility that all the time the rider has presumed himself to be getting the elephant to do what *he* wants, he has in fact been doing what the elephant wants, or at least has at no point succeeded in getting the elephant to do anything he does *not* want to do.

The problem with most of our attempts to change ourselves, and virtually all of our attempts to change others - of which the sermon is pretty much the perfect example - is that they address themselves almost entirely to the rider...When what we really need is a new elephant.

This is the essential point that the Church Calendar brings to our attention in the three weeks - Septuagesima, Sexagesima, and Quinquagesuma that begin today - the period of preparation, for the period of preparation that is Lent.

They are a way of turning our focus from the coming of the Divine Life *into our* lives with the birth of Jesus, to the taking *of our* lives into the *Divine* Life in his Death Resurrection and Ascension.

And they constitute "a recognition by the Church of our inability to change rapidly, to go abruptly from one spiritual or mental state to another. So, long before the actual

effort of Lent is to begin, our attention is called to its seriousness and its significance,"¹ in the way of those road signs that warn, "Changed Priorities Ahead".

But more than that, these weeks are a way of telling us what Lent is, and is not, in order that over the years of practicing its disciplines, a 'change of elephant' will take place - or rather the fundamental change that has already taken place, and been revealed to us in the Epiphany of the Incarnation, will come to be lived out in our bodies - in our whole being - rider, elephant and all...

The 'Gesimas' are about re-framing Lent in such a way that its exercises are not just "beating the air", and their very existence stems from the fundamental understanding of our creation, fall and recreation that is laid out in the consecutive passages from Genesis, spelled out in the Gospels, worked out in the Epistles, across these three weeks. And reflected in analogies like Haidt's elephant and rider.

It is often said, as I have, that these weeks, mark a turning from the Crib to the Cross, but it is *slightly* misleading to speak in such sequential terms. The point is rather that Christ's Incarnation, Epiphany, Death, Resurrection, Ascension and the Outpouring of His Spirit, *are* the thing - the only thing - that changes us. *They* are the replacing of the old human nature and its body of death, with the new nature that partakes of the immortal life of God and is inseparable from it, and Lent and Advent are concerned with the lens through which we can contemplate those things - so that we do not turn the Gospel of Christ into another gospel which is no gospel at all - whilst Ordinary time concerns itself with the disciplined practice of life *in* the new nature, and the whole is a continual process of being changed from water to wine, darkness to light, from soil to spirit...

The New Testament is clear that in Christ humanity is forever changed, that in his lifting up all men are drawn to him, and the whole created order reconciled to God. But it is at the same time full of warning phrases like "many are called but few are chosen" "lest having preached to others I should be castaway" or "who has bewitched - you having begun in the spirit are you trying to continue in the flesh"... Or the positive exhortations that are their counterparts - "put on the new man", "be clothed with Christ", "be transformed by the renewing of your mind"...

It becomes apparent that whilst the life-giving medicine is available to us, given to us, something in our capacity to digest it can be altered; whilst the mind-renewing truth has been revealed to us, something in our capacity to perceive it can and must be changed. And like Advent, Lent - the Gesimas insist - concerns itself with that changed capacity. As one addresses our perception of Jesus' Nativity and Epiphany, the other addresses our perception of his Passion and Exaltation.

¹ Alexander Schmemmann

And we shouldn't be *surprised* by this repetition - by the ongoing need for this repeated process, because it is the very thing that is to be transformed - the thing that is to be crucified with Christ, in order to share in his resurrection - it is this very same thing that filters our engagement with Him - namely our 'body of death'.

We like to think that the process of perception is linear: I see or hear a word - I touch or taste a thing and the experience of it enters into my consciousness. But that is a million miles from the truth. Most of our engagement with reality is unconscious - the realm not of the rider but of the elephant.

At any given moment...most of what impinges on the senses, and most of the thoughts or memories that *might* come to mind as a result, never come to mind at all. A huge amount of unconscious mental effort goes into sorting through and selecting a slim thread of consciousness, from an immense array of mental candidates for awareness. "There is" as the Cognitive Psycho-physiologist Emanuel Donchin puts it "a filter at work, and an intelligent one at that." Donchin's neurological studies track the timing of the mind's operations" and have shown that the mind recognizes a word within the first 150 milliseconds of seeing it. But nothing shows up in awareness, as the subject reports it, for another 100 milliseconds or so, and that's *if* it shows up at all."

We are filtering. And if that is true of our recognition of *any* word, how much more of our recognition of *the Word*. If it is true that the existing schema of our semantic memory is constantly selecting for our awareness a fraction of all the ordinary sensory material we encounter, what of our encounter with the *invisible* reality of Christ's transforming presence that transcends our senses.

We need re-training, we need new schema, a new filter. We need eyes to see and ears to hear. We even need re-training, it transpires, to take on the training, that will allow us to take on the gift of a new nature.

So, in these weeks counting down from 70 to the 40 days of Lent, before the bursting forth of the New Creation at Easter, we are presented with that need, and with some of the most basic ways we might already be filtering the Gospel of the Risen, Crucified One, as well as some of the ways we might open ourselves to *being* re-trained.

The first and possibly most foundational - our readings today make clear - is that we are programmed to compete and compare.

The Workers in the Vineyard demonstrate that our whole system of value and significance, is based on comparison - because it is founded in the imperfect. If the full measure was available to us; if we knew that everything there was to have was ours, and that there was nothing more to be received; if we knew there is only one coin and we have been given it; if we knew that it is the nature of the infinite fullness of God - of Love - to be undiminished in being shared or handed over - knew that there is only gift

and gratitude, and even the terms labour and reward are the product of our *broken* relationship with Creator and creation, and our *fallen* understanding of love - then we would have no interest in comparison. But because our experience is founded in finitude and scarcity, we cannot help but compare ourselves - measure ourselves - against others.

This is manifest in our every interaction from the moment we realise there is anyone in the Universe *apart* from us. And it is so written into our thought, and speech, and feeling, that unless we are careful, even our pursuit of righteousness becomes mere labour, or another competition.

I assess my spiritual well-being by thinking I am kinder than him, or more patient than her, or more Christlike than them at least - or by lamenting my status as *less* gifted, or less blessed than those who are rich, or those who laugh now whilst I mourn. But this pattern of thinking has nothing do with the Kingdom of God.

We must be retrained to hear the voice of Jesus say to us, of other's righteousness, "what concern is that to thee, follow thou me", before we can even contemplate carrying one another's burdens; to hear him ask us - "do you begrudge my generosity" - "is your eye evil because I am good" - before our hearts can be changed by that same gratuitous kindness.

But as it stands, instead of treasuring what is given, and faithfully using it in confidence and grateful response, we are generally more prone to burying it in pique, or waiting for what we think *ought* to be coming our way.

Our old nature is so conditioned by the need to rise above others to be noticed, so accustomed to the scheme whereby the fittest survive, and only to the victor go the spoils, that we cannot easily conceive of even the training we are called to, or the work that is given us, in terms beyond the race, or the labourers. Yet, even as scripture uses these very images to address us, it is subverting them.

What does labour mean in the economy of grace - in the light of the fullness of God's self gift? What does it mean to strive for a prize we have already been given, and which does not fade?

The conundrum confronts us as we are led by the Spirit into Lent, because the elephant in us is so bred to compete and compare, that just as the cross is constantly in danger of becoming a stumbling block, or being made into banner for our own conquests; just as we are routinely in danger of seeing the lifting up of the Lamb, or the sacramental presentation of it in our liturgies, through the lens of the very human hierarchies they *overturn* - so we are, in this season, at risk of turning Lent's disciplines into a form of contest, where our disciplines nurture the very thing they are to undo - pride, self reliance, judgement of others.

There is a task - work to be done in the Vineyard of our hearts; there is an effort to be made - a slow costly process of training to undergo, but it is one that must be continually kept from turning against itself. We must continually guard against the vehicle of healing being infected with the disease it is to cure. And the antibody that enables that to happen is what is prescribed at the very beginning of this season, as at the very moment we turn from the altar into the world of our work.

The acknowledgement that the new creation, like the old, is first and always God's work - the activity of his Spirit in which we are invited to share. And the recognition that our participation in it must be according to his image - conformed to to the likeness of his Son.

It is striking that the Son is absent from the first account of Creation, when scripture attests that everything that is exists through him, but that apparent absence reflects the eternal posture of the Son to the Father which is the only way creation could come into being, or be held in being: submission - the opposite of self promotion - the standing aside which we might even call courtesy, that makes space for the Other. The giving away, and stepping back, that says - 'let there be that which is not me'.

This is the self same attitude and posture that we are called to imitate - that is the source and core (and focus) of everything we can legitimately call the work of discipleship. This humility that echoes the Divine Fiat with the Fiat Mihi - let it be unto me according to thy word. This is what we are seeking to write in our bodies through Lent, in order to perceive it ever more clearly as a result in the Cross, in order to live ever more fully, in our turn, the life of the New Creation.

There can be few things more rare or more extraordinary than watching an untameable beast - like a wild elephant - kneel to welcome onto itself a rider, or submit so freely to a leading it is never obliged to follow, that animal and rider are as one... Indeed we have probably only ever seen such a thing in fiction. But to see our human nature do just that, not *just* to train our nature to do that - not just to learn self control of that order - but to be so converted in our affections, that joyful submission to the One who pours himself out for us is our *instinct*: that is a thing of beauty beyond compare, and life beyond imagining. And that vision - that once for all miracle which turns word into flesh - is what Lent is teaching us to see, to enter, and to embody.

So let there *be* courtesy on a cosmic scale. Let there be Lent.