

## **Behold, we go up to Jerusalem**

Sermon preached at Pusey House on Quinquagesima Sunday 2014, by the Principal, the Reverend Dr George D Westhaver

*Behold, we go up to Jerusalem, and all things that are written by the prophets concerning the Son of Man shall be accomplished.*

On Ash Wednesday, the members of the Body of Christ receive a special invitation. It is usually put in words like this:

I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church, to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy word.

Well, why would anyone want to accept an invitation like this?

We can find the answer, in part, in the epistle for today. This is St Paul's great hymn to love.

Love is patient and kind...love does not insist on its own way ... Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends...

This is the most popular Bible reading at weddings. People getting married hope that this kind of love will shape their lives, and that this kind of love will help them to find happiness.

It's important to note a couple of things about hymn to love. The love described there is not first a human love. It is the greatest of the spiritual gifts because it expresses something fundamental about the life of God. When we encounter the kind of love which St Paul describes when encounter a reflection of the divine life. Secondly, this love is not for married people. It is a gift of grace, the work of the Holy Spirit in us, which is an essential element of the spiritual life. Faith, love, and charity are the supernatural virtues. They are not just ideas or goals, they are the motive force of our spiritual lives, as well as settled habits and dispositions which are shaped in us by the work of grace. Charity, St Paul says, is the crown of these virtues, the one without which the others are worth nothing. We can see this more clearly if we think of love in relation not only to the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity, but also to the nature virtues.

In a letter to St Jerome, St Augustine helps us to see how love is united to our knowing and choosing:

Temperance [says St Aug] is love keeping itself entire and incorrupt for God; fortitude is love bearing everything readily for the sake of God; justice is love serving God only, and therefore ruling well all else, as subject to man; prudence is love making a right distinction between what helps it towards God and what might hinder it. Love, then, out of a pure heart, and a good conscience and faith

unfeigned, is the great and true virtue, because it is, ‘the end of the commandment’”<sup>1</sup>

The reason one might accept the invitation to keep a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God’s holy word, the reason we might choose all of this for ourselves, is that the goal of lent is the discovery of the love describes in different ways by St Paul and St Augustine, the love which is both perfect, and the form or shape of all virtue: love serving God only, and therefore ruling well all else. To put it in other terms, a couple of weeks ago we heard St Paul calling us to a life of disciple, and describing Christian life like that of an athlete in training. He said that it was worth all the training because this race offers the best prizes. The prize to which he pointed is the one described more clearly today.

But why do we need all the hard work which St Paul describes, keeping our body under, or what is put before us in the invitation to keep a holy Lent? That is made clear for us in the Gospel in the most wonderful way.

***And taking the twelve, he said to them, “Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written of the Son of man by the prophets will be accomplished.***

The 12 disciples picture to us the Church in miniature, the Church which has not yet been brought to birth. In this calling of the 12 to go up to Jerusalem, Christ speaks to us today to call the whole Church to go up to Jerusalem – this is simply another form of the invitation to keep a holy Lent.

Well, what happens at Jerusalem?

***For he will be delivered to the Gentiles, and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon; they will scourge him and kill him, and on the third day he will rise.”***

This is not a reading usually chosen for weddings. But, what our Lord describes here is simply the working out of love which St Paul hymns and praises. What leads Christ to Jerusalem and to the cross is love, what he displays there is love. The goal of the Lenten journey is that we both see this love, and that this love is shaped in us.

Well, here is the problem. How does the little group which pictures the Church in miniature respond:

***But they understood none of these things; this saying was hid from them, and they did not grasp what was said.***

The three-fold repetition emphasizes the disciples lack of understanding. This picture of the apostles – the Church in miniature - is a challenge to us. We are invited into the Gospel to hear the invitation. We are also invited to recognize that we share in some measure in the lack of understanding of the disciples. This lack of understanding may take different forms. It may be that Christ’s invitation to go up to Jerusalem simply leaves us cold or puzzled. But even if we are already disciples, even if we know something of

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<sup>1</sup> [Ep 167.11, to Jerome, AD 415 in Carmichael, *Friendship*, 65

the mystery of the cross and the depth of the love of God, we still need to see ourselves alongside the disciples in their confusion.

Whatever we know of the wisdom and love of God, there is still so much more to see. Love of God is so much above our capacities to grasp or understand, that it is as if we remain blind. This is not depressing, but a wonderful encouragement. Whatever we know of the love of God, we have more to learn or receive than we can even imagine.

The Blind Man in the Gospel offers us another way of both seeing and taking part in the transforming journey of Lent.

*As he drew near to Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging; and hearing a multitude going by, he inquired what this meant. They told him, "Jesus of Nazareth is passing by."*

The Blind man is near Jericho. Jericho, is the city of the curse, city that was rebuilt only when builder sacrificed his children and buried them in the walls. Jericho is the city which represents the rebellion of the world against God and the suicidal character of sin. Humanity which remains near the walls of Jericho will always be blind.

The blind man is already part of our worship each week. We make his words our own: He cries out *Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!*

Week after week we pray with him: Lord have mercy on us. Christ Have mercy on us, Lord have mercy on us. Whenever we pray these words, whenever choir sings them, we pray with the man who wants to see. In some way, We know that we too are in the shadow of Jericho.

Very important – what happens next? The crowd tells the man to be quiet.

Don't admit your blind, the world says. The world cannot tolerate another Lord, a Lord which challenges both despair that things cannot get better, or that calls us to seek the higher and better things. And this is not just a problem with a world out there, sometimes the numbing voices of the crowd are the voices of our own heart. Maybe we've given up or are worn down, or simply don't want any one, even God to direct us.

The blind man shows the better way: *but he cried so much the more, Son of David, have mercy on me.*

The disciplines of Lent are all ways by which we give a definite expression to prayer "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me." Resolving, for example, to consider in a definite way how we pray now, in Church, and at home, and how we might make more space in our lives during Lent for prayer would be one way of calling out to the Lord who draws near with his disciples, with and in the Church.

Christ, of course, does not pass by. He stops, he hears the man, He speaks to him: *What do you want me to do for you?* Here Christ addresses each one of us and He address the Church. He asks us to seek the better way, to ask for our eyes to be opened. He does not pass by.

Let us begin the journey of Lent with expectation, with faith and with hope. The journey to Jerusalem is a journey toward the love of God, in the love of God. If we know ourselves, and how difficult it is to be shaped by genuine love, then we know that this cannot be an easy journey. The failures and the struggles won't surprise us.

The Love which is described by St Paul is the same Love which takes Jesus and all His disciples to Jerusalem and to the cross. Whatever we know of this love, there is more to be discovered. This same love is given to us as our food in the Holy Communion today. Our Lord does not pass by, he stops to ask 'What do you want me to do for you?'

Let us come to the Holy Communion with the prayer of the Blind man who sees, and with the confidence that our Lord will not pass by, but that He will strengthen our sight, rebuke all that chokes against love in us, and feed our souls.

*O LORD, who hast taught us that all our doings without charity are nothing worth: Send thy Holy Spirit, and pour into our hearts that most excellent gift of charity, the very bond of peace and of all virtues, without which whosoever lives is counted dead before thee: Grant this for thine only Son Jesus Christ's sake. Amen.*