

***What wilt thou that I shall do unto thee? And he said, Lord, that I may receive my sight.***

Last week at the General Synod of the Church of England, one of the bishops declared that support for a no-deal Brexit is morally indefensible. I found this assessment both refreshing and depressing. On the one hand, it was refreshing to hear the Bp say that support for a no-deal Brexit is morally indefensible because he based this assessment on the claims of love. This is refreshing – all our decisions should indeed be based on the claims of the divine love for us and in us. The divine love, the highest gift of the Spirit, bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love, ἡ ἀγάπη, *caritas*, love never fails. The Lord of all love has taught us that all our doings without charity are nothing worth.

During the Monday evening study group these past few weeks, we have considered Dante's description of his journey up Mount Purgatory. For Dante, the journey up the mountain is all about how the love of Christ is shaped in us. This transformation in love is the healing of our souls. The whole journey is a journey of love, love for wrong things – our neighbour's hurt – is replaced by a rejoicing in the good gifts of God that we see in our neighbour's lives or that we want for them.<sup>1</sup>

The goal of this re-formation in love is wonderfully described by St Augustine who invites us to see the great virtues as love properly ordered and directed. Temperance, says Augustine, godly moderation, is love, love keeping itself entire and incorrupt for God. Fortitude, courage in the face of trials or suffering, courage is love, love bearing everything readily for the sake of God. Justice is love also, love serving God only, and therefore ruling well all else. Prudence, practical wisdom, is love, love making a right distinction between what helps it towards God and what might hinder it.<sup>2</sup>

So it was refreshing and helpful to hear the arguments for Brexit put in terms of the claims of divine love. Support for Brexit, the Bishop argued, shows a lack of love as justice, a lack of care for how the withdrawal of the UK's contributions to the EU would affect millions of people in the continent, and undermine the bonds of love by which we are knit together. Support for a no-deal Brexit, he argued, is practically unwise, it is not loving, because it will cause economic hardship, real suffering, for many in the UK.

And yet, the bishop's judgement that a no deal Brexit is morally indefensible could be an offense against the same love on which he based his arguments -- he could be wrong. My point is not to argue for the good of Brexit, but to say that the best arguments I have heard in favour of Brexit have also been cast in terms of love. These arguments have argued that Brexit will give the UK government the capacity to make a right distinction between what helps toward the most important goods and what hinders it. On the one hand these arguments have challenged the economic apocalypse view, they have argued that Brexit is a form of economic love for Europe as well as the UK, and, on the other hand, they have made the case for courage, for love bearing trial and hardship for sake of good things, not evil ones.

I'm not arguing for a particular point of view here, but neither am I arguing for moral relativism or indifference. In her commentary on Dante's *Purgatory*, Dorothy Sayers argues

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<sup>1</sup> On this journey toward love and moved by love, indifference or laziness is replaced with zeal for what is most valuable, most beautiful, most worthy of our love.

<sup>2</sup>Ep 167.11, Augustine to Jerome, AD 415, modified. The original reads: "Temperance 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'."

that one form of laziness or accidie ‘which appeals very strongly to some modern minds is that acquiescence in evil and error which readily disguises itself as “Tolerance”’.<sup>3</sup> Tolerance can both express love, and Tolerance can express indifference to error or hurt. How do we know when our willingness to show patience, to enter into an argument with which we don’t agree, to listen to it from the inside, to feel its challenge, when is this godly love bearing all things, and when is it giving up? When is it a self-indulgent proclamation of our moral superiority which acquiesces in what brings harm? I hope that we can feel that challenge, and our insufficiency, because it is precisely our need for being formed in love that is being addressed today – in Lord’s words to us in the Gospel, in pilgrimage of Lent which is put before us, and in the particular character of that journey.

***THEN Jesus took unto him the twelve, and said unto them, Behold, we go up to Jerusalem.*** The 12 disciples picture to us the Church in miniature, each one of us who our Lord invites today and on Ash Wednesday to go up with Him to Jerusalem. This is one reason why, if we can, it’s important to gather together on Ash Wednesday: however much we need to make this journey for ourselves, we can only make this journey together.

What happens at Jerusalem, what are we invited to see? ***For he shall be delivered unto the Gentiles, and shall be mocked, and spitefully entreated ... and they shall ... put him to death; and the third day he shall rise again.*** To put this another way, the divine love which St Paul hymns will be put on display in Jerusalem. This love reaches down from the highest heaven to the depths of human need, the arms which stretch out on the cross embrace each one of us and the whole creation. This love conquers the worst form of hatred and injustice, and tramples down death by death.

***And they understood none of these things: and this saying was hid from them, neither knew they the things which were spoken.*** The three-fold repetition of bewilderment emphasizes the disciples lack of understanding. They did not know then what Love looks like, they did not know the claims or the capacity of the divine love, or what it would require of them.

We hear this account today, on the one hand, as those who have already seen the manifestation of the divine love at Jerusalem. We have seen this love shaping the world in the lives of the saints and in those who do not know its origin, we have seen and known this love in our own lives.

But, in another way, we stand with the first disciples in blindness and bewilderment. Whatever we know of the wisdom and love of God, there is still much more to see and to learn. The love of God in its fullness is so much above our capacities to grasp or understand, that whatever we have seen of it is still a small part of what is there to be discovered, 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 discover than we can even imagine.

***As he drew near to Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging.*** Have you noticed that the blind man is part of our worship each week? He cries out ***Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!*** We make his words our own whenever at every mass: *Lord have mercy on us. Christ Have mercy on us, Kyrie eleison, Christe eleison.*

Even as we sit basking in the radiant light of the divine presence, happy here in God’s paradise of delight, the new Eden, with sure access to the Tree of life, we are also, in some way, sitting blind on the roadside in the shadow of Jericho, the city of shadow in rebellion

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<sup>3</sup> Sayers on Canto XVIII, Dante *Purgatory*, p 209 (Penguin paperback). Sloth or accidie, is that weakness of will, that paralysis, in which we are complicit, and which gets in the way of our seeking for the best things and good things for ourselves or for others.

against God, tasting the bitter fruit of the sin of the world.<sup>4</sup> ***Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!***

What happens next? The crowd tells the man to be quiet. Sometimes, this is the voice of the world: don't take that religious stuff too seriously, Don't admit you are blind. Sometimes, it is our own voice, a kind of despair: I'm tired, these are cheap and easy words, why bother taking Lent seriously, I don't believe that I can change, I've tried before and it hasn't worked.

The blind man shows ***the better way: but he cried so much the more, Son of David, have mercy on me.*** Love is also courage, love bears even disappointment with self or with the world, crying out for the unconquerable and all-conquering love of Christ.

Two things – First, we don't have to earn the love of Christ this Lent. Love has stooped down to us. If we look to Christ, if we cry out to him in faith, if we believe in him, we know that we are already justified and made whole. However weak our love is, his love has poured into our hearts already. We belong to him and he will bring us home.

Secondly, 'seeing' is not just a question of knowledge.<sup>5</sup> Having the right info, is not the same as having the love of Christ formed in us. The police officer, or the social workers, or the neighbour, who did not at first recognize the claims of love in the latest or next abuse scandals, or the person, each one of us, who fails to live out the divine love, cannot be fixed by more info, even the right info. Bad choices come from disordered love as well as the wrong information.

The Gospels for the next three weeks are all about demons. First, next Sunday, our Lord encounters the devil, the Father of lies, in the wilderness for us and with us.<sup>6</sup> Then, over the next two weeks, Christ casts out demons, he shows us the power of demons in our love and his greater power to cast them out. Lent invites us to go deeper, to see why education is not enough, to uncover the perversions and confusions of love which shape how we know and what we feel, how we react, and why we struggle with ourselves. We are invited to see revealed and unmasked the obsessions and compulsions which blight our lives or wreak havoc in the world, and to be healed. No wonder we are not sure if we want to set out on this journey.

The struggle with the demons which goes deeper than knowing on the surface helps us to appreciate the disciplines of Lent, and to take heart, to show the courage and practical wisdom which is also love. The disciplines of Lent put flesh on our prayers, it gives them a spiritual weight to rise upward. Spending time in quiet reflection, choosing to make space in our lives for chewing on the Bible, feeding on the Word made flesh, choosing to give of our substance, or choosing to embrace the strange discipline of fasting or self-denial, all these disciplines put flesh on our prayer, Lord have mercy. The point of all these disciplines or exercises is not to stifle our desire, but to give our desire its proper end, to make us more alive. The disciplines of Lent are a way of getting traction between the world and our souls.

If we don't make space for any of these things, if we don't attend to the soil, why are we

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<sup>4</sup> In the 2<sup>nd</sup> Book of Kings we learn that Jericho was rebuilt only when the builder sacrificed his children and buried them in the walls. Jericho is a kind of God-given metaphor for St Augustine's earthly city, the city built in contempt for the love described in 1 Cor 13, which sees the passion as simply failure, or, we might say, the city where the aspiration for glory is mixed up with self-destruction. Human blindness is connected with living in the shadow of this city.

<sup>5</sup> At least the way we usually use the word knowledge, not as in 1 John 3.2 Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.

<sup>6</sup> If we have in some way recognized our blindness, then we recognize our need to allow the Holy Spirit to drive us into an uncomfortable form of wilderness, to face the temptation that we would rather numb over in our favourite way, conceal, or ignore. Making space more space in our lives during Lent for prayer is a basic way of calling out to the Lord who draws near with his disciples, in other words, with and in the Church.

surprised that we see so little change? I've never come across efforts to prepare the soil which have not borne fruit abundantly.

Lent is a way of turning the soil, of working within the character of human life and reality to give power and content to our aspirations and prayers for change, to be shaped in divine love. When our preacher last week spoke about the good of private confession, or making a confession, he was speaking about the way in which many people have found this to be a helpful way of coming to grips with the struggles which undermine our best aspirations, a way to open ourselves to the healing work and word of Christ. We don't come to Christ as disembodied prayers or words, we come with histories and bodies, with habits, and patterns of thought, with compulsions and disordered love as well as with good habits and virtue. The disciplines of Lent are a way of bringing the whole of who we are into contact with the work of the Spirit, of saying yes to the Word taking on flesh for us.

Every mass is an invitation to a kind of mini-Lent and Easter. Every time we gather here, we make the journey from the tree of knowing evil from the inside, from knowing what is wrong as well as what is right in us, to the tree of life. In Jerusalem, we see the love of Christ, the same love displayed in on the tree of life, the life giving cross, in the rood cross above the altar here at Pusey House. This love, says St Bonaventure, 'has reached its savoury maturity on the tree of the cross under the midday heat of the Eternal Sun'.<sup>7</sup> In the sacrament of the altar, we come to eat of the fruit of this tree. Here, 'in the garden of the heavenly paradise, at God's table and altar, here, today, the fruit of the tree is served to those who desire it', to us. Today we are invited not just to see the love of Christ, but to feed on it, to make it our food, and to pray that this food will grow to maturity and fullness in us and for the world.

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<sup>7</sup> "St Bonaventure describes this love as the fruit of the Tree of Life, the Cross: 'This fruit is offered to God's servants to be tasted so that when they eat, they may always be satisfied, yet never grow weary of its taste. This is the fruit that took its origin from the Virgin's womb and reached its savoury maturity on the tree of the cross under the midday heat of the Eternal Sun, that is, the love of Christ. In the garden of the heavenly paradise – God's table – the fruit is served to those who desire it.'" See Dante, *Purgatory*, trans and note by A Esolen, notes for Canto XXIV, p 471. See also Christian Moevs, *The Metaphysics of Dante's Comedy*, p. 101