

Trinity 22 – Justice and Peace have kissed each other
Pusey House, 23 October, 2016, The Principal
Genesis 45.1-7, 15, Psalm 133, Philippians 1.3-11, Matthew 18.21-end

Then the lord of that servant was moved with compassion, and loosed him, and forgave him the debt.

‘Having rights is damnation’. ‘The error of the unmerciful servant in Christ’s parable is that he asserts his rights’.¹ So says Austin Farrer, sometime Warden of Keble College, one of the great English divines of the 20th century, and a regular preacher in this chapel. The unmerciful servant was forgiven an incalculable debt, but he refused to forgive another man who owed him about 20 weeks wages – 3 billion pounds to 6,000, to 70 times 7.² In the end, he gets what he deserves because he asks for it. ‘Having rights is damnation’.

It is unlikely that Austin Farrer intended to rubbish any concept of human rights. The tradition from which at least some theories of human rights emerge can help us to appreciate the logic of the parable. John Locke, for example, argued that ‘No one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions’.³ But what makes this kind of justice our due? Locke’s conception of human rights is a fundamentally theological one. God has created humankind to live and to flourish, and this divine purpose places an obligation on us; we have rights because we have a duty toward other people’s rights, and this duty is also a duty to God.

What is the principle which operates in the kind of justice which Christ puts before us in the parable? It is there in St Paul’s letter to the Philippians. St Paul is probably writing from prison in Rome, ‘in bonds’, writing to the first Christian congregation established in Europe.

I thank my God upon every remembrance of you, Always in every prayer of mine for you all making request with joy [...] because I have you in my heart [...] For God is my record, how greatly I long after you all in the bowels of Jesus Christ.

St Paul’s words belong more to a love letter than a lecture: he longs for his brothers and sisters in Philippi, he loves them. The principle we see in the parable is this longing love, this mercy which reaches out to embrace: *Rise up my love, my fair one, and come away*. This is the same love we see in Joseph who weeps for his brothers, who longs to reveal himself to the very people who betrayed him. To reject the love of the Bridegroom for his beloved, or to reject this love for a son or daughter who the Father seeks, is to reject it for ourselves.

The Union of divine justice with perfect mercy which reaches out to heal is the principle of the Incarnation, of the union of the divine and human in Christ. This union is the subject of the image on the front of the bulletins, from a Psalter illustrated during the

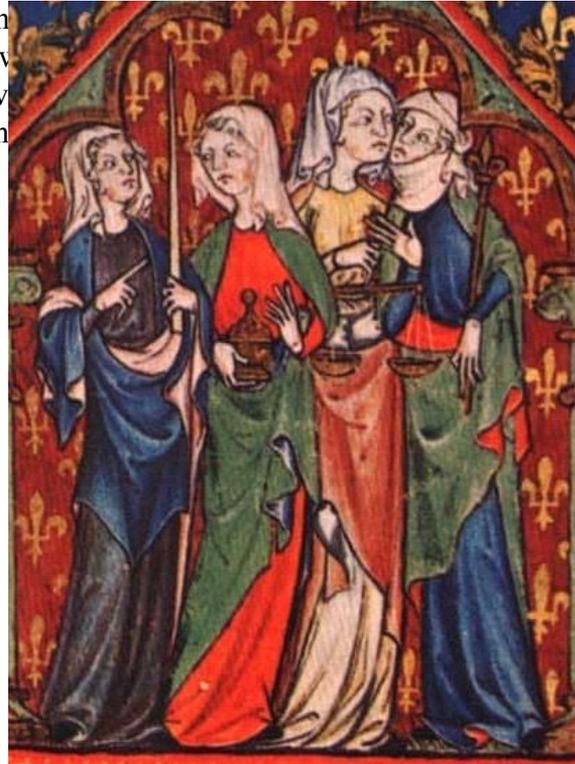
¹ THE CROWN OF THE YEAR, *Weekly Paragraphs for the Holy Sacrament*, Austin Farrer, TRINITY 22.

² What gives occasion to the parable of divine mercy and justice? *Peter said unto Jesus, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times; but, Until seventy times seven*. The point here, of course, is not the numbers. We don’t keep a record which frees us from this instruction after 490 occasions. Rather, the number points beyond itself to the inexhaustible depths of the divine mercy. This is difficult teaching, as hard as anything our Lord said about ‘eating the flesh of the Son of man’, or about the Trinity. In the Gospel according to St Luke, the Apostles’ response to this duty to forgive is revealing: How often do we forgive? 70 times seven, OR, “seven times a day”. “*And the apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith"*”. Luke 17.4-5

³ *2nd Treatise of Government*, §6

first quarter of the 14th century in one of the Benedictine monasteries around Peterborough. ‘Mercy and Truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other’ reads Psalm 85.⁴ The union of the Psalter by the four daughters of God – a combination of ideas or images that both reveal the gift is still in some way hidden, a sacrament.

On the left, we have the sword of truth, ‘sharper than any two-edged sword’. Mercy is pictured by the daughter holding a box of incense. This is the incense which rises with our sacrifice of prayer and praise here this morning, it is the myrrh which anoints the body of Son who pays the debt and secures God’s mercy.⁵



On the right, Righteousness holds the scales of divine justice, while peace holds a lily-staff, the symbol of our Lord’s mother and of ‘peace in earth’. The illustrator shows the paradox of this union in the rather grumpy expression on the face of Justice, a paradox which is there in the words of Lancelot Andrewes and T S Eliot: ‘[...] this Birth was /Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.’⁶ That is also the principle of forgiveness 70 times 7.

The search for the same union of justice and peace lies behind the different kinds of Truth and Reconciliation programmes: in South Africa and Northern Ireland, in Bosnia and Rwanda. These programmes are witness to our recognition that the union of peace and justice, of righteousness and mercy, is a principle of creation, the gift of a new beginning, even if it is difficult to unite them in a way which is not a parody. The meeting of the four daughters of God is both tender and tough, strong in the power of a dying love which conquers death. It is the embrace which makes it possible to forgive a friend or a spouse, or even an enemy, without denying the grievous character of the wound. The unmerciful servant rejects this union, and so he finds himself outside of an embrace which is the gift of both life and freedom.

The union of the divine and human in Christ is also the union of the divine justice and the divine mercy, the longing love of God for each of us and for all of us together. The union of justice and peace which is there in the parable is also the love which overflows in creation, the source of new beginnings. I was asking what this principle looks like when I encountered a powerful BBC documentary with a title in the form of a question, aired just over a fortnight ago: ‘A World Without Down's Syndrome?’⁷. This leads me

⁴ On the feast of the Nativity, congregations in the Western Church have often heard portions of Psalm 85 read since the days of the early Church. Christians have heard in this psalm a prophecy of the Incarnation: “Truth springs out of the earth”, out of the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary; “Righteousness looks down from heaven”, the Divine Word comes down from heaven .

⁵The picture of the four daughters of God is paired in the Peterborough Psalter and in others like it with the Visitation, the meeting of Elizabeth who is carrying John the Baptist in her womb, with her Lord’s mother, the Blessed Virgin Mary carrying the divine Son. In the embrace of Elizabeth and Mary, tender and beautiful, we see the longing which St Paul describes, and we see, even more, something of the longing of God for his people. In the Incarnation, God longs for His people, longs for each us, pursues us. This is the principle of the divine mercy.

⁶ T S Eliot, ‘The Journey of the Magi’: ‘I had seen birth and death, But had thought they were different; this birth...’

⁷ 6 Oct, 2016

to tread onto the treacherous ground of issues around the beginning of life. You will have to decide if I'm finding the message of the parable in all the wrong places.

'A World Without Down's Syndrome?' is presented by the actress and writer Sally Phillips, who read modern languages here at New College. She is described as 'a mother to three boys, all of whom like swimming, cricket, ice-cream and Barcelona football club. Olly, the eldest, also has Down's Syndrome'. Sally Phillips was moved to produce the documentary after the announcement that a new non-intrusive test will soon be available that is said to detect Down's Syndrome early in pregnancies, and with 99 per cent accuracy. Since 9 out of 10 couples in the UK who are told that they are likely to have a Down's Syndrome baby choose to end the pregnancy, what will be the result of this new test?⁸ It is a powerful documentary. In one scene, a mother describes the birth of her Down's Syndrome daughter: the midwife cried, she was terrified. Over time, she came to see Down's and her daughter very differently, and to love her with a fierce love. What makes the scene so powerful is that she is speaking in front of her own daughter, and in a room full of people with Down's Syndrome – and almost everyone is crying. During the documentary, we make a brief road trip to Iceland, where no Down's Syndrome babies have been born for the last five years. We meet a young woman who speaks two languages, has a job, and is preparing to be married. She asks why her life isn't worth living. This brief summary is simplistic, on both sides of the issues which the documentary present. Sally Phillips concludes with a question: 'Although Olly was the reason I started making this film, you'll be relieved to hear it's not just about him. It's not just about Down's Syndrome either. It's a film that asks what kind of society we want to live in and who should be allowed to live in it.'

Thinking in terms of the parable, this question led me to ask about the embrace of divine justice and divine mercy: how far does that embrace reach, and who is included in it? The questions which Sally Phillips asks are tough questions, and people of good faith come to different conclusions. The way in which she asks the question on a social level makes it clear that these are not just questions about individual choice, a principle which she affirms. The way a frightened couple wonders how they will provide for a disabled child with little social or financial help is not a question for a single person only, or not only for a couple struggling with the crushing weight of an unknown future often described for them in the most apocalyptic way. 'It's a film that asks what kind of society we want to live in and who should be allowed to live in it.' This past summer the financial trials of Brazil cast a strong light on the Paralympic Games and their meaning and importance. Four years ago the UK chose to spend great sums of money on perhaps the greatest ever Paralympic games, and invited us to rejoice in the successes of people who struggle with different forms of disability. The parents of disabled children make it clear that there is no contradiction between loving a child with all one's heart and hoping that the next one does not have the same challenges. On the other hand, the trends which the documentary puts before us leads us to ask for whom our society has a place.

It is important to say again that the point of our Lord's parables is not to condemn or simply to make us uncomfortable, even if they begin by appearing to do both, but rather to lead us into the embrace which is a new beginning for us and for all the sons and daughters of God.

⁸ 'This comes at a stage when for the first time in history people with Down's Syndrome can expect better health, life expectancy, wellbeing and employment opportunities.'

Sally Phillips questions emphasize at least one point where Dr Pusey and Friedrich Nietzsche are in close agreement. (Although, for those of you who were here last week, I'm not sure where George Michael stands on this one.)

In a book published in the year of Dr Pusey's death, Nietzsche pictures a madman – a kind of Shakespearean fool – running into a crowded marketplace and declaring that God is dead.⁹ More than that, says the fool, 'We have killed him, you and I. We are all his murderers! But how have we done it? ... Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the whole horizon?' Presumably, he is speaking to people who go to church on Sunday. The exasperated fool throws down his lantern:

"I come too early," ... "I am not yet at the right time. This prodigious event is still on its way, and is traveling - it has not yet reached men's ears. ... This deed is as yet further from them than the furthest star – and yet they have done it themselves!"¹⁰

In a similar vein, Dr Pusey often commented that it is possible for us to hold together in our minds and in our lives two opposing principles. It is only over time, over generations even, that the consequences of our principles are worked out, that the meaning of the 'deeds' we have done, or ideas we embrace, come 'to be seen and heard'. This is Sally Phillips's question to us – what principles are warring in our hearts, in our social lives, and how will they be worked out? On the level of the discreet acts of forgiveness, we may acknowledge the message of the parable, and surely that is hard enough, a birth which feels like death, 70 times 7 again. But what does the embrace of mercy and truth, justice and peace look like as the creative principle ordering our lives together?

Next week, we will hear the parable of the coin. Whose image and superscription is on the coin? And, whose image and superscription is on the human soul? We are made in the image of God, and the superscription speaks of God's longing for us. Where do we recognize this image, and what does that recognition require of us?

At the Eucharist we are invited to see in the bread and wine of Holy Communion the body and blood of Christ. The great divines make extravagant claims about what is given to us in these sacramental signs, there we discover this divine-human marriage of heaven and earth, there we come to the Supper of the Lamb, the principle of a restored human community. These signs look flimsy and weak, all too ordinary, and yet there is more substance to them than all the bread of Egypt which Joseph gives to save the Lord's people. When I saw the people with Down's Syndrome in Sally Phillips's documentary, there was something of this same challenge there. According to the standards which order so much of our lives, these people, however successful, fall into the category of the not as strong, not as bright, the weak. And yet, the love which they offered and evoked was life-giving and powerful; they are the 'professors of love'. The capacity to see beyond the surface, to see strength in weakness, to see beauty in what is not esteemed highly is a kind of sacramental vision. This is a hopeful vision, which enables us to see spiritual principles made real (that was the subject of last week's sermon).

⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (1882), sections 125 and 343

¹⁰ Lightning and thunder need time, the light of the stars needs time, deeds need time, even after they are done, to be seen and heard.

This week, when St Paul describes his longing for his companions in Philippi he is describing something of God's longing for his people, the embrace of a love which is the principle of a new beginning. We are invited to live in the space where mercy and truth meet together, and justice and peace kiss each other, to live there not just for ourselves but for one another. May we both live in and offer this embrace, and may the divine union of truth and mercy take shape in us and in the world.