

Trinity 17 GDW Pusey House 13 Oct 2019, 1st week
The Ever-present Word of God heals our spiritual dropsy and invites us to Go up Higher, into the divine life, by grace first and by spiritual warfare second.

Friend go up higher

The invitation of the Lord Jesus to the crowd hanging on his words give us a destination and a goal: ***Friend, go up higher.***

Where exactly are we to go?

On first Sunday, let us give Dr Pusey opportunity to speak of our destination. In Pusey's words, the gift of the Christian life is nothing less 'union with that mystery, whereby we are made partakers of the Incarnation'¹

Or, on this day, perhaps we might also give voice to John Henry Newman, who Pusey described as 'an instrument raised up' to 'build up' the Church. Newman describes our destination in the same simple and all-embracing terms as Pusey: '[Christ] came in that very nature of Adam ... to make us partakers of the Divine nature'.²

The Gospel for today invites us to be healed and to know that we've already been healed, we alongside the man with dropsy. The Ever-present Word of God invites us to go up higher, to go deeper, into the divine life where in some measure we have already arrived, and in which we live and move and have our being.

'Friend, go up higher, go up all the way into the life and communion of love and knowledge which I have with the Father and the Holy Spirit'. Friend go up higher, nothing less will do. The materialist sensibility of our age which sees everything that cannot be measured or analysed as less real, less solid, in other words the exact opposite of the teaching of wisdom of God wherever it is found, the materialist sensibility of our age may make it difficult to grasp the promise of this invitation. The fifteenth century German divine Nicholas of Cusa wrote that 'eternal wisdom is tasted in everything savoured, eternal pleasure felt in all things pleasurable, eternal beauty beheld in all that is beautiful, and eternal desire experienced in everything desired'.³

The invitation to go up higher is an invitation to possess the greater reality to which all earthly delights point:

- the solid and enduring delight which we seek in all things pleasurable,
- the eternal beauty beheld in all that is beautiful,
- the truth in our searching for fragments or pieces of truth.

Or, in C S Lewis' words:

- all pleasures are "shafts of the glory [which] strike our sensibility," and "channels of adoration".

The invitation to go up higher is an invitation to possess what we adore, to go where the shafts of glory have their beginning and end, to love what is most worthy of our love, to choose what is most enduring and good in all that pleases us.

¹ Pusey, Edward B. (1842). *Scriptural Views of Holy Baptism*. Tracts for the Times 67, vol. II, Part II, 4th edn. London: J. G. F. and J. Rivington, p. 49.

² Newman, *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, Vol 5, Sermon 7: 'Mystery of Godliness' (1837), p. 92-3..

³ David Bentley Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, p. 253, paraphrasing or quoting *Idiota de sapientia* 1.

The Gospel invites us to find ourselves in some way already at the final destination, the fulfilment to which we are headed. Go up into the life of God, go up into a fulness which exceeds our asking and imagining.

One of the keys which unlocks invitation for us, helps us to see it, is the timing of the miracle of the Gospel story. The Lord J is in the house ‘on the sabbath day’. Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath day? It is not just lawful, the law of God’s working makes the Sabbath day the paradigmatic day for healing.

The bible describes the struggle for survival and the work it entails as a consequence of sin. The resting from work which was a key part of the law of the Sabbath Day for the people of Israel pictures a rest of perfect harmony, of obedience. The rest from work embodies the rest from the disobedience which lay behind the struggle to survive. The Lord Jesus Christ fulfils the promise of the Sabbath. On the 7th day, the Great and Holy Saturday, he rested from His work – ‘it is finished’. He rested from sin by enduring it rather than choosing it. Christ is our Sabbath rest.⁴ Healing an illness which pictures the devastation of sin embodies his invitation:

Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.⁵

It’s important to see that the rest of the Sabbath which is Christ for us is not an absence put a presence. The sabbath is not primarily about what we don’t do, but about what we are meant to enjoy. The Sabbath is a day of ‘exquisite delight’, a taking ‘delight in the Lord’, of enjoying his superabundant goodness.⁶ In the words of a modern divine:

‘Creation’s being is God’s pleasure, creation’s beauty [is] God’s glory’⁷

The miracle on the Sabbath is an invitation to share in this pleasure and this glory. Every morning at morning prayer, we repeat this invitation in the words of Psalm 95, the Venite:

⁴ The Sabbath day, the day with a morning but no evening: see Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, Bk IV. chap 18.34 and 18.35

⁵ The Sabbath day was for the people of Israel an invitation to enter into the rest of God: ‘² And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made; and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made.³ And God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it: because that in it he had rested from all his work which God created and made’ (Gen 2.2-3). What could this possibly mean? On another occasion when he was challenged about his healing on the Sabbath, the Lord Jesus asserted simply: ‘My Father is working still, and I am working.’ (Jn 5.17). At the risk of causing confusion, I will share st Augustine’s attempt to describe the rest of God. It is helpful, in part, because it shows us the mysterious character of the description of God’s rest, and shows the tip of the iceberg of that which we are invited to discover for ourselves: ‘The repose of God, by which He rests in Himself and is happy in the Good which is identified with Himself, has no beginning and no end for Him; but this same repose of God did have a beginning for creation when it was finished. For the perfection of each thing ... is established in a state of rest, that is ... especially in Him to whom it owes its being, in whom the universe itself exists’. Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, Bk IV. chap 18.34, vol 1, p 125. This is a philosophical way of saying what our Lord says more simply: ‘The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath’ (Mark 2.27) The rest of God is an invitation to share in a repose which is a kind of perfect activity, a share in the love which is God’s being.

⁶ Isaiah 58.14. Is 58:13-14: ‘¹³ “If you turn back your foot from the sabbath, from doing your pleasure on my holy day, and call the sabbath a delight and the holy day of the Lord honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, or seeking your own pleasure, or talking idly; ¹⁴ then you shall take delight in the Lord and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” On ‘exquisite delight’ see J Alec Motyer on Isa 58.13-14: Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, Intervarsity, 1993, p 483: ‘It is a day, therefore, for reverential, thoughtful use coupled with sweet joy’. Also, Jeffrey, *Luke*, Brazos Commentary, p 86: The sabbath returns creation ‘to God’s intended shalom’ (Luke 13, healing of the bent woman), to ‘his health and peace’ – Ex 20.8-11. It invites a renewal of delight in God’s creation, its beauty and fruitfulness as in Isa 58.13-14.

⁷ David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, p 252.

‘O Come let us sing unto the Lord ... Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving; and show ourselves glad in him with Psalms.’⁸

Creation’s being is God’s pleasure, and the Sabbath is an invitation to possess that pleasure for ourselves.

How do we say yes to the invitation? I’m going to ask for a bit of help from the participants in the extinction rebellion here.⁹ But what can we learn from their protest which would help us to hear about the invitation in the Gospel today?

We live in age when most people seem suspicious or dismissive of warnings of judgement from religious folk or from passages of scripture¹⁰:

They shall eat up your harvest and your food; they shall eat up your sons and your daughters, they shall eat up your flocks and your herds; they shall eat up your vines and your fig trees, your fortified cities in which you trust they shall destroy ...¹¹

We may not hear this from the prophet Jeremiah, even if Jeremiah was proved to be correct, but it seems that many are more open to hear prophecies of dire consequences from the prophets of environmental disaster. The warnings about environmental degradation speak to us with an urgency and seriousness which is also there in the invitation of the Lord to ‘Go up higher’. If we know that flaunting the order of nature leads to pollution and self-destruction, then it should not surprise us that the ordering principle of all nature, the Word and Son of God, through whom all things were made, invites us to consider the more all-embracing rules of the divine life which embraces all reality. The same Venite, the Psalm of Praise, which invites us to ‘sing unto the Lord’ with thanksgiving concludes with a stark warning about what could prevent us from accepting the invitation to Go up Higher: ‘Today, if ye will hear [God’s] voice’, if we will hear the invitation to ‘Go up higher’, ‘harden not your hearts as in the provocation, and in the day of temptation in the wilderness’.¹²

We see this combination of invitation alongside warning in the Gospel for today. The kind of sickness which the Lord Jesus heals are never an accident, never just a coincidence. The diseases which Christ heals always tell us something about the Sabbath rest to which he invites us, and about the dangers we face. ‘Dropsy is a condition marked by the body’s inability to process fluids. The person suffering from dropsy drinks because

⁸ ‘Creation’s being if God’s pleasure’ (from above, Bentley Hart). The Venite connects the invitation to praise with an appreciation of God’s creation: ‘In his hand are all the corners of the earth : and the strength of the hills is his also. The sea is his, and he made it : and his hands prepared the dry land. O come, let us worship and fall down: and kneel before the Lord our Maker.’ The Venite, Psalm 95, has been said at the morning services from the early ages of the Church, and it may even come to us from the worship of the Temple.

⁹ I’ll take it as a given that we face a serious, perhaps a dire, challenge from climate change. But these comments will not really consider the methods of the protesters, or even the truth of all that is claimed.

¹⁰ ...which speak of political, environmental, economic, and social consequences which could result from flaunting the principles by which God orders world

¹¹ Jeremiah 5

¹² Each morning, the Church is invited to consider Christian life as a pilgrimage out a land of slavery and necessity, the world of sin, and toward the Sabbath rest. But this invitation comes with a burden, to embrace the vocation of being sons and daughters of God made to share in the divine life and the divine pleasure, is also to choose to enter into a kind of spiritual warfare. Are we ready to enter into the struggle to disentangle the invitation to go up higher, to the eternal delight which we seek in all things pleasurable, the eternal beauty beheld in all that is beautiful, the truth in our searching for fragments or pieces of truth, to disentangle this invitation to the sabbath rest from all that gets in the way, all confusions in our hopes and desires?

he or she is thirsty, but the body retains the fluid rather than processes it.’¹³ For the early Christian interpreters of the Bible, the symptoms of dropsy picture a spiritual illness. St Augustine sums up this tradition:

‘But we correctly compare a person with dropsy to an avaricious rich man, [a greedy man]. For, just as the more a man with dropsy abounds in excessive fluid, the more he thirsts, so the more a rich man abounds in riches that he does not use well, the more he desires such’.¹⁴

Augustine comments further:

‘You see, the disease of dropsy means that the body is full of fluid ...¹⁵ and yet never has enough fluid. In the same way a dropsical heart means the more you have, the more you need’, the more you want.¹⁶

The man with dropsy is a disturbing picture of how at least some of the things which we want desperately can be a kind of poison, how seeking them can but is in opposition to the order of God’s love and so lead to trouble.

Christ comes to the man with dropsy, he takes him, he touches him, he embraces him, and he heals him.¹⁷ On the one hand, the healing is all grace, all gift. This embrace and the healing miracle is one picture of the gift of Baptism, and of our being joined and grafted into the one body by the one Spirit. On the other hand, the healing is a picture of the renewal of that grace in us. The healing is not just behind us, but a present reality. Again, to draw on Newman’s words, the gift of the Incarnation is gift of the ‘Ever-Present Son of God, *mystically reiterating* in each of us all the acts of His earthly life’.¹⁸ The embrace of Christ, and the healing touch described in the Gospel today, is also *mystically reiterated* in each of us. This mystical reiteration, this mystical renewal, is one of the gifts of the sacrament of Holy Communion, of ‘the Ever-Present Son of God’ embracing us, taking us to Himself. Friend, Go up Higher.

But the miracle does not stand alone. Immediately there follows the parable which shows us how we might choose this healing for ourselves. The parable of choosing the lowest seats at the banquet pictures what it means to ‘walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love’. The healing gift comes from the outside, it is given absolutely and once for all.

¹³ Chad Hartsock (Carson-Newman University, USA) ‘The Healing of the Man with Dropsy (Luke 14:1-6) and the Lukan Landscape’, *Biblical Interpretation* 21 (2013) 341-354, Brill.

¹⁴ *The Works of Saint Augustine (4th Release). Electronic Edition, New Testament I and II, Questions on the Gospels* 2.2.

¹⁵ and is indeed endangered by fluid,

¹⁶ *The Works of Saint Augustine (4th Release). Electronic Edition. Sermons, (148-183) on the New Testament. Volume III/5. SERMON 177: ON THE WORDS OF THE APOSTLE, 1 TIMOTHY 6:7-19: WE BROUGHT NOTHING INTO THIS WORLD, AND WHAT IS MORE WE CANNOT TAKE ANYTHING OUT OF IT, ETC.; A DISCOURSE ON AVARICE* p 283. ‘Desires, after all, mean that you want to attain to what you haven’t yet got, because you never desire what you already have. Avarice is indeed insatiable; and even with people who already have much one can still talk about desire, not for the thing they possess, but for the one they want to possess. He owns this farm, he desires to get possession of another which he doesn’t own. But when he’s also got that one, he will start desiring another; he won’t, however, be desiring what he’s already acquired, but what he hasn’t yet acquired.’

‘When you had less, you wanted less, you could enjoy yourself with fewer things, you were thrilled with small sums in your coffers. But because you have now been filled, it means you have also been stretched, you’ve become grossly opulent, legacies coming in daily; you go on drinking, and go on being thirsty. “If I can get this, I’ll be able to do that”.

¹⁷ ‘embrace’ is the reading of Jeffrey in the Brazos commentary on Luke for ‘he takes him’.

¹⁸ Newman 1868: *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, vol. VI, Sermon 1, ‘Fasting a Source of Trial’, (1838), p 3.

And at the same time, we are invited to take the medicine ourselves, ‘forbearing one another in love’. What is given must be worked out in us.

This means that the insatiable describes which dropsy pictures are not just taken from us, we are also invited to struggle with them, to see them for what they are. The invitation to ‘Go up higher’ is an invitation to a kind of spiritual warfare, it is an urgent invitation to struggle with whatever blocks our path, with whatever disconnects us from the environment of God’s purposes for us. This is difficult, and sometimes it’s hard to see what gets in our way by ourselves—we usually need help on the way, the counsel of friends and guides. I could say more about this struggle, but I expect that if you are here this morning you already have some sense of what gets in your way, the things you will bring to confession in a few minutes.

Perhaps one of the great dangers is not taking the invitation to Go up higher seriously, to imagine that it’s for someone else, or to give up on trying to find the rest and delight which the invitation promises. Some of the divines who have been best able to recognize and diagnose the forms which spiritual dropsy takes in these days have also said that one of the greatest dangers is a kind of false modesty that refuses to believe that humanity is destined to live with God and in God. This is a false modesty because it gives more weight to our sense of our own weaknesses or doubts than it does to the invitation and promise of the giver: Friend, come up higher, harden not your hearts, don’t give up on the invitation, don’t give up on the promise. There is a struggle here, and it’s possible to turn our back on what is offered – the invitation is an urgent one.¹⁹

One of the things we do when we gather together for worship on the Lord’s day is to cultivate disciplines of discerning what it means to take the lowest seats, the best seats. We are invited to recognize the voice of Christ inviting us to come up higher, we learn to recognize the character of his presence, of his coming among us, the form which healing takes, to see in the light of Christ’s presence whatever blocks our path.

The ‘longsuffering’ which is part of our vocation means learning how to hear God’s call to us in the very struggles or difficulties which we face on our pilgrimage, the day to day

¹⁹ On the Religious Character of the Extinction Rebellion, and reflections on the spiritual illness of our day: First: ‘These Extinction rebels are putting politics before planet’, Juliet Samuel, *The Daily Telegraph*, 12 OCTOBER 2019: ‘These connections amount to an elaborate theory, which goes like this: the first countries to develop capitalism exploited poor countries to get rich. In doing so, they produced the first carbon emissions, starting us on the road to hell. Now that the great extinction is nearly upon us, those same poor countries are the first to suffer. Rich, capitalist countries have a “climate debt” and must pay up to achieve “climate justice” and avoid “extinction”. What’s required is a revolution to overthrow capitalism, the system that begat all these problems. *This is, you will notice, a highly religious framework, with a concept of judgment day, original sin and redemption achieved by confession and good works. We could spend hours plumbing the psychological basis of this religion – the causes of the rage felt by the teenager, Greta Thunberg, the activists’ consumerist addictions, materialist guilt, self-hatred, family trauma, and so on.*’ Second: Dom Charles Nault, in *Le Démon de midi: L’acédie, mal obscure de notre temps* (L’Echelle de Jacob: Dijon, MMXIII) quotes a writer who warns that radical ecologists may display a desire to see humanity punished, as the one who is guilty of a tyranny over nature, and to redress this wrong, humanity should accept its own self-destruction. Nault speaks of the danger of a kind of ‘realism’ that refuses to believe that humanity is destined to life with and in God (p 88). He warns that the refusal of this grand vocation can appear like humility in that man affirms that he is not worthy of the love of God, but this attitude puts humanity in the place of God – God loved us first, our sanctity depends on this, and what seems like modesty can be the worst can of pride, which refuses the welcome of the infinite in order to be content with what is just at our door (p 90). Benedict XVI: There exists in humanity today a curious hatred of man against his own greatness. Man considers himself as the enemy of life and the equilibrium of creation, as the great disturber of the peace of nature (who would be better off if he did not exist) as the creature that went wrong. it would be better if he disappeared (p 88).

trials of life.²⁰ In worship on the Lord's day, we are invited to enjoy the Sabbath rest which Christ fulfils and gives: O Come let us sing unto the Lord, let us rejoice in the strength of our salvation. The Lord Jesus Christ, comes again this morning and invites each of us and all of us together: Friend, Go up Higher.²¹

²⁰ Mortimer, *Helps to Meditation*, vol 2, p 120, for Trinity 17.

²¹ When we lift up our hearts and sing the song of the Angels, at Mass or in the Te Deum at Morning Prayer, Holy, Holy, Holy, we are not turning our back on the world, but seeking to recognize the dynamism which gives life and breath to all that is. Friend, come up higher, come into the life which is 'the perpetual handing over in love of all the Father is to the Son and the Spirit ... Creation is only a splendour that hangs upon that life of love and knowledge ... a surface, a shining fabric of glory, whose inmost truth is ... the beauty of divine love...' (Bentley Hart, 252, 'as it is eternally expressed by the Trinity: a sacramental order of light'). In all the trials of our daily lives, in all the problems which we face, this is the sabbath rest which we are invited to enjoy. 'O Come let us sing unto the Lord', Friend, lift up your hearts, Go up higher.