

A New Beginning

A sermon preached at Pusey House on the Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity 2014 (The first Sunday of Michaelmas Term) by The Principal, The Rev'd Dr George D. Westhaver

In the sequel to *Alice in Wonderland*, Lewis Carol offers us a helpful way into our readings today, a way through the looking glass to something of the reality. During a profound discussion about the relative merit or birthday and un-birthday presents, Alice says to Humpty Dumpty: "*I don't know what you mean by "glory",'* ...*Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously*" – haven't you always felt this, that there is something sinister about humpty dumpty?, a kind of Batman villain- Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously, and then he tells her that Glory is '*a nice knock-down argument*'.¹

Humpty's assertion is a useful warning about the dangers of the academy. The search for truth or knowledge can be mixed up with both power and pride. To search for a knock down argument may be a quest for power more than truth, and the search for this power usually has more self-assertion than knowledge. Humpty is locked in his own world. He tells Alice that when he uses a word, '*it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less.*' The only question is not a question about truth, but about power, '*who is to be master*'.

One lesson here is that the search for glory is a quest with many perils, the temptation to controlling power and blinding pride among them. And yet, in the Gospel today, the one who humbled himself to death on a cross directs us to look for a certain kind of glory.

Friend, go up higher: then shalt thou have glory² in the presence of them that sit at meat with thee. The word *δόξα*, translated worship in our reading today, can also be translated as glory. This translation, *thou shalt have glory*, helps us to grasp both the fullness of the promise and the way it can be twisted. When St Paul exhorts the Church in Ephesus and this congregation here this morning that '*ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called,*' he is simply echoing the more inspiring words of his Lord and master: '*Friend, go up higher: then shalt thou have glory...*'

The hope that we have in Christ can be perverted and twisted to offer a vision of Christian life that is about less rather than more, as if the most faithful kind of person were the one who wanted nothing, or whose desire for life had been in some way quenched, replaced by rigid rule following. Instead, our Lord says, Friend come up higher. To follow Christ is to want more rather than less, it is to have as the object of our desire what is most worthy, most attractive: the goodness, wisdom, and love of God for us and in us.

Gregory of Nyssa is perhaps the most modern and mystical of the Cappadocian fathers. He saw this search for glory in the search of the Bride for the Bridegroom in the Song of Solomon. There, the Bride's search for her Beloved alternates between the joy of finding and sadness and struggle of losing the one she longs for. Gregory finds in her

¹ The idea for this connection is from Fr Robert Crouse, longer sermon for Trinity 17, Lect Central.

² 'glory' in RV, 'worship' in AV, 'be honoured' in RSV

search the desire of every soul to walk worthy of her vocation, to respond to the bidding, Friend come up higher:

The soul, having gone out at the word of her Beloved, looks for Him but does not find Him. ... In this way, she is in a sense, wounded and beaten because of the frustration of what she desires, now that she thinks that her yearning for the Other cannot be fulfilled or satisfied. But the veil of her grief is removed when she learns that the true satisfaction of her desire consists in constantly going on in her quest and never ceasing in her ascent, seeing that every fulfilment of her desire continually generates a further desire for the Transcendent ... ³the bride realises that she will always discover more and more of the incomprehensible and unhopd for beauty of her Spouse, throughout all eternity ...⁴

Friend come up higher, do not settle for mediocrity, do not settle for less, you are made for glory. For St Gregory, the desire for God, like the desire for wisdom, for goodness, never comes to an end, for whatever we receives prepares us to see and receive more. A visiting bishop helped me to understand this recently: coming into the Church should be like going into the Tardis, it is to come into a place much larger than we expected – it is a bigger on the inside than it is on the outside.

But when thou art bidden, go and sit down in the lowest room... The lesson here cannot be that one should take a low seat with the assurance that this is the best way to be elevated. That would still be pride, with hypocrisy and dissimulation mixed in. This would be *'the secret creeping up of the serpent, than the meekness and lowliness of heart which was in the Son of God'*⁵ By this parable, Christ encourages us to ponder what it means not simply to sit in a low seat with an unchanged heart as the best way to get a higher one, but to ponder what it would mean to take the lower seat in our heart. Neither can this be another kind of lie, pretending that we don't have the gifts or abilities with which God has endowed us, or giving up the capacity even to tell the difference between the higher and lower. We are left to ask how ***'lowliness and meekness'*** can help us to walk worthy of our vocation. What kind of Glory are we called to enjoy?

Perhaps the miracle with which our Gospel lesson for today begins can help. The first thing that we learn about the miracle is that it takes place on the Sabbath day. This is not just an incidental detail, it is probably the key to understanding the sign which the miracle is.

Sometimes when our Lord heals, he urges that people not to talk about it. But whenever he heals on the Sabbath, he draws attention to the miracle. It is not that Christ is looking for a fight. Rather, he teaches by word and action not only that healing is OK on the Sabbath, but that the Sabbath is the paradigmatic day for healing. Why?

³ Thus the veil of her despair is torn away and

⁴ ... Thereupon she is torn by an even more urgent longing, and she ... communicates to her Beloved the affections of her heart. For she has received within her God's special dart, she has been wounded to the heart by the barb of faith, she has been mortally wounded by the arrow of love. For *God is love* (1 Jn 4:8). Nyssa, ed. Daniélou, *From Glory to Glory*, p 45

⁵ Isaac Williams makes this point, in his sermon for Trinity 17.

⁶ This parable is an another example of how the Son of God comes down, comes down not only to take on human nature, but to meet us in our confusions. He speaks as it were to children, he appeals to that desire for worldly honour and worldly glory in us.

Remember that thou keep holy the Sabbath day. Six days shalt thou labour...but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord thy God. In it thou shalt do no manner of work...For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth ... and rested the seventh day.

God's people are instructed to rest on the seventh day because God rested on the seventh day. Now there is obviously a paradox when we talk about God resting.⁷ God's activity never ceases. When Christ was criticised for another Sabbath healing, he said simply, ***My Father worketh hitherto, and I work.*** The Father is working, and I am working. And yet God does not change, nothing can be added or taken away from Him. We get another way of understanding this paradox and the glory to which we are called in the way God's rest is described in Genesis: *And God saw everything that he had made, and, behold, it was very good.* The rest of God is pictured as a kind of loving beholding, a delight in what is good. The Sabbath was given as an invitation to humankind to participate in the enjoyment of God (*I speak as a fool*), to share in God's loving regard of what is worthy of our love and worship. For humankind, this means, in part, coming to know and delight in God and in one another through worship.

This joyful beholding is another way of showing how the call to glory and the vocation to lowliness belong together. The kind of heart which the Sabbath rest encourages is the attitude or disposition which is ready to receive: not to seize the highest place, but to hear all the more clearly in not seizing it: *Friend, go up higher.* This is the opposite of humpty dumpty's definition that 'glory is whatever I say it is'. That is an attitude fundamentally closed to sharing in God's way of seeing things.

What might Humpty's closed-off attitude look like in us? Rather than endure the pain and the challenge of growth, we may close ourselves off, insist that we are fine as we are, and accept a kind of mediocrity. We are probably all too aware of mediocrity, places in our lives where our ideals and how we live do not match, where we don't seem to be able to choose or to do what we know to be higher, or where we feel weighed down by habit or disappointment. *Friend go up higher* is an invitation to suffer growing pains, to endure with the bride in the Song of Solomon the disappointment of not finding as well as the joy of being found. It will be painful. The brightness of God's light, of a truth that we don't make up for ourselves, will hurt weak eyes, however much this truth is also freedom and life.

In his discussion with Alice, Humpty Dumpty does have something helpful to teach us. He argued that un-birthday presents are better than birthday presents because one can receive an un-birthday present on 364 days, and a birthday present on only one. Humpty was not content to limit the gift to just one day in the whole year. In a similar way, the gift of the Sabbath day was not meant to limit human enjoyment of God and one-another-in-God, to one day in 7. Rather, the Sabbath day was given both as a promise that over-flowed and a rest that pointed to a fulfilment.

We gather, not on the Sabbath day, the 7th day and the last day of the first creation, but on the 8th day, the Lord's Day, the first day of the new creation. By his rest in the grave on the 7th day, Christ broke the power of pride, the spiritual dropsy, which has imprisoned and still to some extent still imprisons humankind. On the 8th day, today and every weekly celebration of our Lord's resurrection, He addresses the whole Church

⁷ one of those place where human language and human understanding fail before a reality great than our mind can grasp

and each one of us anew: *Friend, go up higher*. We are invited to the banquet with whatever measure of spiritual dropsy keeps us puffed up and weighted down, invited and knowing that in seeking Christ we are already taken up in His work of recreation.

Sunday, the day of the resurrection, is the first day of the new creation. The man who is healed of dropsy is a picture and promise of this new creation. The rest of the Sabbath is a rest of receiving, not making up glory according to our definition, but receiving what Gods seeks to give.

Today, we are invited to hear the invitation, *Friend, go up higher*, not to be content with mediocrity, but to be willing to endure the pain of searching for the One who has already found us. We are meant for Glory, not a glory that we make up for ourselves, but a greater glory which the Bridegroom seeks to give us.

Holy Father, who gathers us around the table of thy Son that we, with all thy household, might partake of this holy food: in that new world wherein the fullness of thy peace is revealed, gather people of every race and tongue to share with all thy saints in the eternal banquet of Jesus Christ our Lord.