

Trinity 19, 11 October 2015, Pusey House (Sunday of 1<sup>st</sup> Week)

‘Walking with a Renewed Mind to the House of God’

George Westhaver, Gen 18:23-32, Ps 141:1-9, Eph 4:17-end, Matt 9:1-8

***For whether is easier, to say, Thy sins be forgiven thee; or to say, Arise, and walk? But that ye may know that the Son of Man hath power on earth to forgive sins (then saith he to the sick of the palsy), Arise, take up thy bed, and go unto thine house.***

The preacher who wishes to focus on the positive, the preacher who hopes to present the message of the Gospel in a way that is attractive, is faced with an immediate problem in the readings for today. They insist that we confront first the problem of sin. Great, just what everyone wants to think about on the first Sunday of term, the problem of sin. But this is not an issue that the Church has invented, a tool to control, even if it has been used that way at times, rather it is a challenge at the core of the Lord Jesus teaching. He is the one who says, at the beginning of Gospel reading for today, ‘Son, be of good cheer, thy sins be forgiven thee’. The first words attributed to Christ in the Gospel of St Mark put this promise the form of a call: ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel’. How can this message be an attractive message, a message of hope, and how might it be particularly relevant at the beginning of another academic year? It will take some time to get there, but I hope that we will have something to say about this by the end of the sermon.

My favourite short description of repentance is offered by the Greek Orthodox bishop Kallistos Ware.<sup>1</sup> It is particularly helpful today because he suggests how repentance is connected with a kind of spiritual freedom from paralysis, how repentance and forgiveness offers a new capacity to get up and walk. Indeed, Bp Kallistos’ description of repentance helps us to see why the epistle for today, Ephesians 4, is a kind of commentary on the miracle in the Gospel. In letter to Ephesians, St Paul exhorts us not to walk in the vanity of our minds, with a darkened understanding, but rather to ‘be renewed in the spirit’ of our minds, that we put on a new man, a new nature, a renewed mind which is the gift of God.

‘What in fact is meant by repentance?’ asks Bp Kallistos:

‘It is normally regarded as sorrow for sin, a feeling of guilt, a sense of grief and horror at the wounds we have inflicted on others and on ourselves. Yet such a view is dangerously incomplete ... We come closer to the heart of the matter if we reflect on the literal sense of the Greek term for repentance, *metanoia* / *μετάνοια*. This means “change of mind”’

Or, to put in terms of the epistle for today, repentance is the renewal of our minds:

not just regret for the past, but a fundamental transformation of our outlook, a new way of looking at ourselves, at others and at God—in the words of The Shepherd of Hermas, “a great understanding.”<sup>2</sup> ...

As a “new mind,” conversion, recentering, repentance is positive, not negative. In the words of St John Climacus, “Repentance is the daughter of hope and the denial of despair.”<sup>3</sup> It is not despondency but eager expectation; it is not to feel that one has reached an impasse, but to take the way out. It is not self-hatred but the affirmation of my true self as made in God’s image. To repent is to look, not downward at my own shortcomings, but upward at God’s love; not backward

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<sup>1</sup> Kallistos Ware, *The Inner Kingdom*, SVP: New York, 2001, ‘The Orthodox Experience of Repentance’, 45

<sup>2</sup> ‘A great understanding—but not necessarily an emotional crisis. Repentance is not a paroxysm of remorse and self-pity, but conversion, the recentering of our life upon the Holy Trinity’.

<sup>3</sup> Ladder 5 (PG 88:7648).

with self-reproach, but forward with trustfulness. It is to see, not what I have failed to be, but what by the grace of Christ I can yet become.

Repentance, in other words, is a living out of the Lord's words not just to the man in the Gospel, but the fruit of the living Word addressed to each one of us today and to the body of Christ today: 'Sons and daughters, be of good cheer, thy sins be forgiven thee. Arise, take up thy bed.'

In my experience, whatever pressures come from the outside, the worst kinds of guilt are the ones which well up from the inside. We don't need help to feel guilty, but we do need help to find a way out.

The challenge of accepting this new beginning is represented in a compelling piece of 13<sup>th</sup> century stained glass in Canterbury cathedral, a piece of glass connected to readings for today. In the Old Testament lesson, Abraham has something like the place of the men who bring their paralyzed friend to Christ in the Gospel. Abraham hopes that the future of Sodom won't be decided by the evil which its inhabitants have chosen, even by the abuse with which his nephew Lot and his guests will be threatened. Abraham asks God to pardon the city for any sign, any crumbs, of goodness. The angels who visit Abraham are the same ones who in the next chapter will lead Abraham's nephew Lot out of the condemned city to safety. The angels give one strict order to Lot and his family: they cannot look back, they should not turn around to look behind them at the city which was destroyed for being a place where the divine goodness and hospitality was entirely rejected. That kind of turning is not life-giving repentance but a paralyzing wallowing in sin. But Lot's wife does look back, and she is turned into a pillar of salt. In the Canterbury glass one sees the angels leading Lot and his daughters to safety, while Lot's wife frozen to the spot, her gaze fixed on the city in flames, a place of chaos. There is a kind of looking back which is part of our turning toward the future which God prepares for us, and there is also a kind of looking back which keeps us paralyzed and unable to move. This being turned to a pillar of salt may come from a giving up of hope, a failure to see that God's mercy is greater than our weakness. Or, this being frozen to the spot may come from a desire to enjoy what needs to be left behind. In practical terms we could speak here of the perils of gossip, or of the paralyzing effects of giving the greater part of our attention to what is wrong, what is wrong with ourselves, our friends, with the Church or with the world – fill in the blank with your favourite gripe.

'Sons and daughters, be of good cheer, thy sins be forgiven thee. Arise take up thy bed and go unto thine own house.' Being turned away from what keeps us stuck, and turned toward the voice of Christ (metanoia) is the gift of a way out, to look forward in hope, to see what by the grace of Christ we may yet become. These words addressed to us today are the promise that our story is not limited by mistakes or weaknesses or even awful things we have chosen or done.

The paralysed man is a picture of what sins do to us, what it means to be turned into a pillar of salt. In the epistle, St Paul describes the people (Gentiles) who do not hear Christ's word of hope as 'being past feeling'. Choosing sin, in small ways or great ways, numbs us. St Paul also says that these people who give themselves up to sin have their understanding darkened. The consequence of choosing sin, especially choosing what we know to be the lower thing or the wrong path, is a certain paralyzing darkness of the mind. Without being able to see where we need to go, we cannot begin to make our way.

In a university like this, it is clear that there are many different kinds of knowledge which may be acquired apart from the renewal of the mind of which St Paul speaks. Yet, at the same time, no knowledge is acquired a part from God: Christ is the light who

lightens every person who comes into the world, the wisdom and reason by which we have whatever power to think and to know that we have. This also means that knowledge of the highest things, knowledge of God and of our beginning and end, is not just information. The ‘new understanding’ which is part of taking up our bed and walking is the response of our whole selves to God. This is why St Paul describes a renewed mind as one that is ‘created in righteousness and true holiness’. The struggle we all have in trying to living a good life, even to know what goodness requires of us, is not about following rules, it is about trying to hear the voice which says ‘my son, my daughter, be of good cheer, leave the place where you have been imprisoned behind, go to the house where you really belong’.<sup>4</sup>

The angel who speaks to Abraham in OT lesson for today is one of three angels who appeared to Abraham and Sarah at their tent and home. The mysterious elements of this visit, what the angels promise and do, as well as Abraham and Sarah’s reaction to them, led the early Christian interpreters of the Bible to see in the visit of the angels a Theophany, a visible manifestation of God the Holy Trinity. In one of the most famous artistic representations of this visit, Andrei Rublev’s icon, the three angels sit around a table. They enjoy a meal which is both what Abraham provided them, and a meal which is also the feast to which we are invited today. In the icon there is a space at the table, an invitation to the viewer, to us, to join the feast, not only to know God come in the flesh, but even to share in the life which the three angels manifest, the life of the Trinity with which this service today began, and with which we will finish in the Three-fold promise of blessing.

I would like to conclude by turning our attention to Gregory the Great’s exploration of the promise which is there both in the mysterious angels visit to Abraham and Sarah, and there also in the words of our Lord to the healed man. If our Lord teaches us to see the man’s paralysis as a kind of picture of sin, then we can expect that the other details of the story, and specifically Jesus’ words, will also have a richness and a depth of promise. Gregory the Great focuses in particular on Christ’s instruction to man to go to his house, *Arise, take up thy bed, and go unto thine house. And he arose, and departed to his house.*

Gregory invites us to see a depth of meaning in this ‘house’:

‘As the house of the body is a bodily habitation’, so the mind builds a kind of house by the things it desires. What we desire becomes the house or the place where we live.<sup>5</sup>

as particularly important. He wrote:

*House* is also used to mean the dwelling-place of the heart [the place of inner wisdom]. So to a certain man who was cured was it said: *Go into thy house* (Mk. v. 19); for it is fitting that a [person], after he is forgiven, should return to his own mind.<sup>6</sup>

For Gregory, this is the ‘renewed mind’ which is built by God for humanity:

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<sup>4</sup> The paralysis which the man pictures, being past feeling, is closely connected with not knowing what we are made for. We find an extreme image of this paralysis in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. The lowest pit of hell, the place where one finds those who have betrayed their friends, their country, or God is not a place of fire. It is a place of ice. Hell is a place of rigidity and immobility, a kind of paralysis. Satan keeps the ice frozen by beating his wings. In the tradition of interpretation of the Bible, the basic sin which leads to all others, the sin which keeps Satan’s wings beating and the ice frozen is the sin of pride. The echo of pride in our lives is the voice which says, first and foremost, “I am my own, I am my own. My mind is my own, to fashion what truth I shall please. My body is my own, to dispose of as I please.” (‘The Freedom of Heaven and Hell’, Anthony Esolen) This position may be chosen, or it may be the place we have fallen through fear or weakness.

<sup>5</sup> paraphrased from the 1844 translation: ‘As the house of the body is a bodily habitation, so that becomes to each separate mind “its own house,” whatsoever thing it is used to inhabit in desire’. (<http://www.lectionarycentral.com/GregoryMoralia/Book08.html>)

<sup>6</sup> M. F. Toal, *The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers*, vol iv, 192-3. This gives an excerpt from Gregory the Great, ‘God Man’s House’, from *Morals in Job*, Book VIII, paragraphs 33-5. For the 1844 translation, see <http://www.lectionarycentral.com/GregoryMoralia/Book08.html>

‘For man was made to look upon his Creator, to dwell upon His beauty, to live in the joy of His love.’

For Gregory, the paralysed man is a picture of the one who has ‘lost the *place* [or the house] of his soul; for wandering in darkened ways, he has gone far from the dwelling place of the true light’. Gregory also connects losing this place with a kind of paralysis, a kind of weakness or despair, a sense that there is no way forward, no way back to our real home.<sup>7</sup>

Again, being given the power to ‘Arise and walk’, or leap, or run, is not about following arbitrary rules, but about finding the God-given path to the table sent by the three angels who visit Abraham and Sarah, the table set for us by the divine Bridegroom.

What is the house to which we are sent by the healing and restoring word of Christ? Gregory continues:

*God is the place (house) of man...* The [proper] *place* [or house] of [humanity], but not his place in space, is the Creator Himself. God created man that he might dwell within Himself. This place man abandoned when, giving ear to the voice of the tempter, he abandoned the love of the Creator.

Being stuck on the matt or bed with paralysed man is what it looks like when we abandon or turn away from the love of the Creator, falling into, or choosing a pattern of live which builds a different kind of house.

But when [says Gregory] Almighty God, redeeming us, showed Himself to us in a bodily manner, [even pursued humanity] who had fled from Him, [God] came to us as a place wherein He might keep lost [humanity]. ....

In the end nothing else will do, nothing else will satisfy, but this House which is not only built by God, but a dwelling with God. This is the House to which the three angels invite Abraham and Sarah in the meal to which we are also invited. C S Lewis describes the character of this House in terms of a longing for beauty:

‘We do not want merely to see beauty, though, God knows, even that is bounty enough. We want something else which can hardly be put into words – to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it’.

Let us pray that this morning we may discover again what it means to find a home which does not disappoint, a place of restoration big enough for all, a house where we do not only hear our Lord addressing us with a living word of hope, but that we may dwell with Him and in Him with the whole company of saints and angels:

***Arise, take up thy bed, and go unto thine house. And he arose, and departed to his house. But when the multitudes saw it, they marvelled, and glorified God, who had given such power unto men.***<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> ‘But he that has “gone down to hell,” shall no more “ascend into his own house,” in that him, that despair overwhelms, it puts forth without from the habitation of the heart. And he cannot return back within, because when he has been ejected without, day by day he falls urged on into worse extremes.’ 1844 trans.

<sup>8</sup> In the Christian tradition, there are different ways to describe the journey to the House which God builds. One of the best known describes this seeking of the kingdom in terms of a three-fold path: purgation, illumination, union. Purgation is the battle with sin, the purging lives from sin. It includes not just what we do, but also how we think, the desires or thoughts which we embrace. The stage of purgation is the state of taking up the cross, of choosing suffering rather than sin, of looking inward to discover when we are fighting against ourselves.

The second stage often called illumination. This is characterized by the filling of our souls with light. Illumination is the work of Holy Spirit in our souls. It is also the call to a new life, to the ‘new creation’ which St Paul speaks of in Epistle. We prayed for this last week when we prayed that we might love, might desire, what Lord commands. We prayed for illumination.

The third stage is often described as a type of union: It is the summit of the soul’s ascent. It is the perfecting of image of God in the soul, a perfection of love of neighbour, the mystical union of Christ and the soul. To some extent, these different stages go on at once, yet there is a distinction. When our Lord calls to ‘Arise and to go to our own house’, it is a call to move through these stages.