

Trinity 19, 7 October 2018, Pusey House (Sunday of 1st Week)

Problematic Freedom

Christ enlightens the mind and heals the soul so that we may see clearly and walk freely.

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

And be renewed in the spirit of your mind; that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness Eph 4.23-24

There is at least one thing on which people on different sides of the Brexit debate agree – that if it is carried out, Britain’s leaving the EU will bring about the most momentous political and economic changes of recent times for the UK at least. Assuming that there are sensible people seeking what is good and right on both sides of the debate, why is there such disagreement, finger-pointing, and blame? I won’t pretend that we can answer those questions in the next 10 minutes, but we can learn something about the complexity of making big and important decisions, and about how our minds are shaped and formed before we even encounter those questions.

Both St Paul’s exhortations to the Ephesians, and St Matthew’s account of the healing of the paralyzed man, present Christ as the one who enlightens our minds and heals our souls, the one who enables us to see clearly and to walk freely. First, we will look at how the images of seeing and walking shape both the readings and their message to us. Then we will consider the nature of the change which is asked, what is this clear seeing and walking freely. Finally, we can consider what our destination is, what do we want to see, where do we want to walk? I may even comment on how this change affects what we think about Brexit or other big questions. Above all, we see Christ as the one who enlightens our minds and heals our souls, the one who enables us to see clearly and to walk freely.

St Paul describes the Christian life as a certain kind of walking, a certain kind of movement. He begins with a warning –

THIS I say therefore, and testify in the Lord, that ye henceforth walk not as other Gentiles walk,

St Paul tells the new Xns of Ephesus that they cannot take their cues from the world around them, from their home culture. They need to be bi-lingual – to speak and live in the place they find themselves, but to find in Christ the sign-posts which, on the one hand, guide them to a destination which leads out or beyond their native culture, and, on the other, sign-posts which enable them to be a kind of transforming leaven in the very place where they live. This is a hard challenge, and it’s not become easier. To be a disciple of Christ will often lead to being out of step with the place where we live. But how do we know when being out of step just means that we are stuck in a kind of prejudice, and when we are choosing that difficult but life-giving pilgrimage which is to follow Christ?

St Paul describes the walking problem as a certain kind of intellectual problem, problem of seeing and not seeing. These other people walk

‘in the vanity of their mind, having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart’.

This sounds almost unbelievable. This university is full of brilliant people of all kinds of faith or none. How can we take seriously the claim that being alienated from God means having a darkened understanding? Don’t we know that an atheist can be a great biologist or philosopher, or that Christians can be as blind or unwise as anyone else?

There are many kinds of knowledge which are acquired apart from the renewal of the mind of which St Paul speaks.¹ But there are kinds of knowing which cannot be separated from the kind of people we are. This is what even the secular world acknowledges with conflict of interest guidelines – if there is power, or money, or pleasure on offer, our principles can become very flexible, reason itself seems to bend. In a more mundane way, if we are governed by our desires, or blinded by pride or by anger, we cannot see clearly. We all know that when we see it in other people, it's sometimes harder to see it in ourselves.

The gospel reveals one aspect of this darkness. Christ offends the serious religious people by forgiving the man's sins. Only God can forgive sins. But Christ then asks a question which he asks us also: ***For whether is easier, to say, Thy sins be forgiven thee; or to say, Arise, and walk?*** Imagine the man and his friends' disappointment – Don't you see, Rabbi, I'm paralyzed? In his response -- ***that ye may know that the Son of Man hath power on earth to forgive sins--*** Christ teaches us to see the miracle as a sign. He heals the man's body to teach something else. The man's paralysis is also a sign, it pictures the consequences of sin. He represents all of us, the people Christ came to heal and to set free. The paralysed man pictures our being stuck, unable to move, but also being unable to see why. And this being stuck and partially blind is a problem we know all too well, finding ourselves in a situation where we feel trapped and unable to see clearly. But Christ does not just reveal the power of sin to cripple, he reveals his greater power to set free and release, and this power is what is on offer this morning. The Gospel and the epistle challenge us to see when our own sin or blindness is hidden in the problems which appear to have another cause. And Christ's words are spoken and renewed again for us: Arise, take up thy bed and walk.

So, to sum up: Both the Gospel and St Paul's letter reveal different kinds of being stuck and off-track, and this incapacity to walk as we are meant to walk is connected with a lack of wisdom, the wisdom of Christ who penetrates the symptoms to the causes and principles.

The second thing for us to consider is what marks the difference between walking blinding and seeing clearly, walking freely. St Paul directs the Ephesians, directs us to

be renewed in the spirit of your mind; and that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness

On the one hand, St Paul challenges Ephesians, and challenges us, to make a choice. On the other hand, he describes this choosing as something which has already happened. We are invited to do what has already been done for us and in us.²

We are in a very different situation to the paralyzed man who is brought to Christ. We have been claimed by God already, we have been washed in the waters of new birth, and risen with Christ. The word of release and forgiveness – arise, take up thy bed and walk – this has been spoken not just once, but repeated with the constancy of God's mercy and with renewed power for us. We are invited to choose again what God has chosen for us already. Our choosing is important, but the priority is not on our choosing but on God's act. We base our confidence on what God has done and is doing – Christ has come and claimed us for His own, after we confess our sins this morning, the word of release and freedom will be spoken again for us, and Christ comes near again in the sacrament of his body and blood, nearer to us even than to the man on the stretcher.

¹ 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 of the atheist or the Buddhist or the Christian.

² Col 3.9-10 As he writes in another place, we are being invited to put these forms of blindness behind us, ***'seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds; And have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him.'***

Finally then, what is the destination or goal which is put before us this morning? If Christ is the one who enables us to see clearly and to walk freely, what do we want to see, and what is our destination? On the one hand, it is presented to us as choosing to live a good life, giving up lying to others and to ourselves, choosing what is good and what builds up, turning away from bitterness. But these different choices are not isolated actions, they are summed up in instruction to ‘put on the new man’, to put on Christ who has already claimed us for Himself. We are invited to discover in these choices a real encounter with God, not just techniques to live a good life. In another way, we are invited to let our minds be shaped by the Spirit which communicates the wisdom, the life, and the power of release and renewal which we find in Christ. In this light, we see the blindness which St Paul criticizes to be a lack of hope. The ones who are lost loose themselves in punier, smaller things because they don’t know what they are meant for. C S Lewis describes this problem in blunt and compelling terms:

“Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”³

The invitation to put on Christ is an invitation to find a destination which is both worthy of us and which offers real power for change and renewal.

If Christ is the one who enables us to see clearly and to walk in the freedom for which we are meant, how does this change us when we return to the big decisions? Does being a follower of Christ teach us what to think about Brexit? On the one hand, of course, the answer is no. The conclusion we come to about Brexit or other big political decisions emerges from a sometimes messy combination of principles, affections, and prejudices. On the other hand, as we are shaped by the wisdom of Christ in us, by the character which St Paul describes, putting on Christ, the character of all our decisions changes, the way we see the world changes and continues to change. The answer to the big questions which confront us are almost never purely technical questions where we find the answer just by getting the right facts or the right information. We make our decisions and choices based on who we are. Growing in righteousness and holiness does not just mean that we act differently, but we think and choose differently. We are invited today to see Christ as the one who enables us to see clearly and to walk freely.

I should probably stop there, but I want to leave you with the reflections of Gregory the Great on our destination and goal. He focuses on Christ’s words to the man, ‘***Arise, take up thy bed, and go unto thine house***’. Gregory thinks that if the miracle is a sign, then Christ’s words to the healed man are also a sign guiding us to a treasure waiting to be found:

‘*House* [says Gregory] is also used to mean the dwelling-place of the heart [the place of inner wisdom]...⁴ *God is the place (house) of man...The [proper] place*

³ Lewis, “The Weight of Glory,” in *The Weight of Glory*, ed. Walter Hooper, London, Harper Collins, 1976, p. 16.

⁴ ‘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 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>)

[or house] of [humanity], but not his place in space, is the Creator Himself. God created man that he might dwell within Himself.’

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 and the fulness of divine life.⁵ C S Lewis describes the character of this House in terms of a longing for beauty, a longing which we are invited to find both renewed and fulfilled this morning:

‘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’.⁶

Arise, take up thy bed, and go unto thine house.

See also 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>

‘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.

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’. What is the house to which we are sent by the healing and restoring word of Christ?

⁵ **Ambrose:** Thee alone I follow, Lord Jesus, Who heals my wounds. For what shall separate me from the love of God, which is in Thee? Shall tribulation, or distress, or famine? I am held fast as though by nails, and fettered by the bonds of charity. Remove from me, O Lord Jesus, with Thy potent sword, the corruption of my sins. Secure me in the bonds of Thy love; cut away what is corrupt in me. Come quickly and make an end of my many, my hidden and secret afflictions. Open the wound lest the evil humour spread. With Thy new washing, cleanse in me all that is stained. Hear me, you earthly men, who in your sins bring forth drunken thoughts. I have found a Physician. He dwells in heaven, and distributes His healing on earth. He alone can heal my pains Who Himself has none. He alone Who knows what is hidden, can take away the grief of my heart, the fear of my soul: Jesus Christ. Christ is grace, Christ is life, Christ is Resurrection. Amen.

⁶ From “Meditation in a Toolshed” C. S. Lewis.

See also this quotation, following, from C S Lewis which illustrates the idea of entering into the House where God dwells, from *Mere Christianity*:

“Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on; you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make any sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of - throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were being made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.”