

# The Gift of a New Past

*A sermon preached in the Chapel of the Resurrection, Pusey House, Oxford on 4 June 2023 (Trinity Sunday), by Father George Westhaver, Principal of Pusey House*

ISAIAH 6.1-8, REVELATION 4.1-end, JOHN 3.1-15

*And they rest not day and night, saying, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come. REVELATION 4.8*

**B**EHOLD a door opened in heaven. This door has been opened and it remains open. We are each of us invited to look through this door, to walk through this door, to live both there and here. It is important for us to see and to know, that what we do here in this chapel and in all the other places where we worship, day by day, and Lord's day by Lord's day, participates in the worship which St. John describes. We are not just seeing something at a great distance from us – when we look through the door open in heaven, the door which remains open, we see the reality in which we are participating right now, nearer to us than we are to ourselves. St. John is using symbolic language to describe what is beyond the normal grasp of our faculties. He is using symbolic language, but he is also describing the things which are most real, most solid, most enduring.

When we join in the praises in which the choir will lead us, *Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come*, we will be praying with all the company of heaven. We pray with those who gather with us and sustain us on the other side of space and time. Our prayers and our worship constitute that open door. *Lift up your hearts* – this is the work of the Spirit, the work of grace, our hearts are lifted up by the same Spirit who lifts up St. John.

The altar here at Pusey House, and all the altars in all the churches, are connected by the same Spirit to the altar which St. John sees. The light of the candles on all these altars reflects the light which burns in heaven. It is one light and many little lights. We, brothers and sisters, are with those who are falling down before the throne which St. John sees. Behold a door opened in heaven.

The figure who St. John sees, like a jasper and a sardius stone, is beyond any human representation, God, Almighty God who did not stay closed in his heaven, but made himself close to us.<sup>1</sup>

Are the living creatures symbols of the whole creation which praises and worships God? Or are these creatures full of eyes and wings and praise representations of the four

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<sup>1</sup> 'John can only hint at the sense of beauty and joy he feels in [this] presence. This mysterious figure is God, almighty God who did not stay closed in his heaven but made himself close to man, [almighty God who takes on human life and human nature]...in a mysterious but real way God makes his voice, symbolized by thunder and lightning, heard in history'. BENEDICT XVI *GENERAL AUDIENCE Paul VI Audience Hall Wednesday, 12 September 2012*

Gospels which are living powers? Are the twenty-four elders a picture of the whole people of God, or do the twenty-four elders evoke also the living scriptures and books of the Old Covenant? We could have many sermons contemplating what we see through the open door.

The doctrine of the Trinity is not a human invention. When we pray to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, we respond to God who has made Himself known to us.

<sup>2</sup> To know God as absolute Being, absolute knowledge, and absolute Love, is to be spiritually reborn: it is to know ourselves as encompassed and upheld by Providential care, and thus it is to see our own lives in a new spiritual perspective.

[To know the communion of love, goodness, and knowledge, to know the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit] is to lose ourselves in the worship of a goodness and a glory infinitely beyond ourselves, infinitely beyond all earthly things, infinitely beyond all worldly pretensions and pettiness. It is to see [feel, and embrace, ‘remember’] our troubles, our frustrations, our disappointments, our ambitions and achievements, all in a new spiritual perspective—a radically different perspective—the perspective of eternity.<sup>3</sup>

I would like to point to one part of the gift of the new life which is ours. Some of you heard me speak about this after Easter. To be spiritually reborn, to share in a real way in the life of God the Holy Trinity, is not just to be given a new future. We are also given a new past. I do not just mean that we come to see our own history and the history of one another in a new light. That is true. But what we come to see is more real and more true — stepping through the open door changes not just our future, but it gives us a new history, a history caught up and transformed by this ‘goodness and a glory infinitely beyond ourselves’, embraced in the sweet and strong providence and wisdom of God. We are given a new past.

There is a correspondence between our worship here at Pusey House, the worship of all the churches of the world, and what goes on in heaven. There is also a correspondence between our inner life and the Triune God who is before us, God more near to us than we are to ourselves, and God who is our destination.

The Bible tells us what the great inspired philosophers and teachers have also seen more indistinctly: we are made in the image and likeness of God. This is not a static gift, but a dynamic one. We have been stamped and formed in God’s image; all people are

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<sup>2</sup> ‘When we speak of God as Holy Trinity, we speak the language of theology: we speak of God as Father—God as source and ground of being; we speak of God as Son—the eternally begotten word the perfection of all knowledge; we speak of God as Spirit—the eternal will of God, the perfection of all love. Whether ...we speak the language of theology in any sort of technical way, this doctrine and this festival have a very basic practical religious significance for each one of us.’

<sup>3</sup> *A Sermon for Trinity Sunday* Fr. Robert Crouse St. James’ Church, LaHave, Nova Scotia, 1 June, 1985, <http://www.lectionarycentral.com/trinity/Crouse2.html>

illuminated by the light of God. In baptism, in the Christian life, the image which was damaged is remade. But again, this new image is not static. We are made in the image of God, and we are moving toward a greater likeness of God.

To be made and reborn in the image of God is to be made and reborn in the image of God the Holy Trinity. Our lives do not just share in the life of God, our lives are shaped by our communion with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

One of the most famous ways of describing what this means is given to us by St Augustine of Hippo in this great treatise on The Trinity:

‘Thus there is a kind of image of the Trinity in the mind’<sup>4</sup> This trinity is the mind itself, its knowledge, and the communion of love. Knowledge is the offspring of the mind itself. Knowledge is the mind’s word about itself. Love is the third element. These three are one (1 Jn 5.8) and are one substance. The offspring is not less than the mind, so long as the mind knows itself as much as it is. Love is not less than knowledge or mind so long as it loves itself as much as it knows and as much as it is.’<sup>5</sup>

What Augustine calls ‘mind’ in the passage above, he goes on to describes as memory and remembering:

‘These three then, memory, understanding, and will, are not three lives but one life, nor three minds, but one minds.’<sup>6</sup>

‘Here we are then with the mind remembering itself, understanding itself, and loving itself. If we see this we see a trinity, not yet God of course, but already the image of God’.<sup>7</sup>

How then does this remembering, knowing, and loving, how does living in this reality, give us a new past, a new history? ‘Our being in God’s image is not just something given, like our having two ears; it is more a kind of program, which we have to execute.’<sup>8</sup>

Augustine makes it clear that the being made in the image of the Trinity is a kind of program to execute as he comes toward the end of his study:

‘This trinity of the mind is not really the image of God because the mind remembers and understands and loves itself. ‘This trinity of the mind is the image

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<sup>4</sup> H. Bettenson, *The Later Christian Fathers*, p 235, Augustine, *De Trinitate* IX.18. In *St Augustine, The Trinity*, 2<sup>nd</sup>, translated and introduced by Edmund Hill, the same passage reads: ‘And so you have a certain image of the Trinity...’

<sup>5</sup> This is a paraphrase or re-writing of *St Augustine, The Trinity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., trans. and intro. Edmund Hill, Book IX.18: ‘And so you have a certain image of the trinity, the mind itself and its knowledge, which is its offspring and its word about itself, and love as the third element, and these three are one (1 Jn 5.8) and are one substance. Nor is the offspring less than the mind so long as the mind knows itself as much as it is, nor is love any less so long as it loves itself as much as it knows and as much as it is.’

<sup>6</sup> Augustine, Hill trans. X.18, p 301

<sup>7</sup> Augustine, Hill trans. XIV.11, p 379

<sup>8</sup> Edmund Hill, introduction, p 57.

of God' because it is also able to remember and understand and love him by whom it was made. And when it does this it becomes wise.

... Let [this mind] worship the uncreated God, by whom it was created with a capacity for [God] and able to share in him. In this way it will be wise not with its own light but by sharing in that which is the supreme light, and it will reign in happiness where it reigns eternal.<sup>9</sup>

We are reborn in the image of God. We move toward the likeness of God as we worship God and live the life which is in the image and likeness of God. To grow in Christ, to live the life of God the Holy Spirit, means that our remembering, and knowing, and loving, comes to share in God's remembering, knowing, and loving of us.

To know ourselves and one another, to love ourselves and one another, even in some small way, as God knows and loves us, is to be given a new past, a new history. This is not just something subjective, a new perspective. This is a new life, a new history, it is to be given the more real, the more true history.

St Augustine shows us what this means in his Confessions. He looks back over his whole life, and he sees the God of love and wisdom seeking him, pursuing him, changing him. This means, for Augustine, that even his most petty, or stupid, or dark sins become part of God's search for him. If you wonder how God can give a new history to you, how God can give a new past as well as a new future to each of us, you could pick up a copy of Augustine's Confessions for yourself. I am confident that you will find it more interesting and compelling than the confessions of whatever TV celebrity we decide to expose and crucify in the weeks to come.

A door is open in heaven, the door remains open. In prayer and worship, we look through that door, we step through that door. To be reborn is to be given not only a new future, but a new history, a new past. We find ourselves as we look for God, and in finding ourselves we find God.<sup>10</sup> And, finding God, we praise Him.

No doubt we come with many frustrations about ourselves, bad things which have happened to us, or bad things which we have done. Made and reborn in the image and likeness of God the Holy Trinity, we can come to see the very things which we find most painful about ourselves and our history bound up and embraced in the loving and sweet providence of God who goes to the depths with us and for us. In God the Holy Trinity, not even our past is dead or inert. God who has loved us and raised us up gives us not only a new future, but a new past. And strangely, the more deeply we come to know ourselves in our redeemed past, the more we discover that it is not about ourselves at all, but God: that He might be adored and praised. Adored and praised in Himself, in the other, in all of His created order, and for all time.

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<sup>9</sup> Bk XIV.15, p 384. 'This trinity of the mind is not really the image of God because the mind remembers and understands and loves itself, but because it is also able to remember and understand and love him by whom it was made. And when it does this it becomes wise. ... Let it worship the uncreated God, by whom it was created with a capacity for him and able to share in him. In this way it will be wise not with its own light but by sharing in that which is the supreme light, and it will reign in happiness where it reigns eternal.

<sup>10</sup> Edmund Hill, p 59.

Let us with eyes open and awake join with the whole company of heaven who rest not day and night, saying, *Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come.*