

A Homily for the Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity

A sermon preached in the Chapel of the Resurrection, Pusey House, Oxford, on Sunday 15 October 2023 (The Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity) by Father Sam Aldred, Vicar in Central Swansea, and Chaplain at the University of Wales, Trinity St David

GENESIS 18; ST. MATTHEW 9.1-8

WHOSE voices can be heard in our Gospel this morning?
The person at the centre of this story, the “man sick of the palsy”, is voiceless.

His bearers, those unnamed and unnumbered individuals who carry the sick of the palsy on his mattress, are also silent.

There are three voices that we can hear.

First, the scribes of Israel. They are given three words, directed against Jesus: “This man blasphemeth”.

Three words denying Christ his power to forgive sins. Three words dismissing Christ’s power to heal. Three angry, bitter, reactionary words projected by angry, bitter, reactionary men.

The second voice belongs to the crowd. There is an indistinct rumble of interest from the bystanders witnessing this interaction. If this were a television show and you put on the subtitles, they might read something like “crowd mutters approvingly”.

But although the crowds marvel at the healing performed by Christ, they comprehend only part of what has taken place.

They see a paraplegic walking and they know that a miracle has been performed. But they lack the eye of faith to perceive the inward forgiveness of this man’s sins.

They see only half the picture, and so respond with only half a voice of praise.

Our translation says: “they glorified God, which had given such power unto men.”

Jesus is to them a healer, a wonderworker.

They do not hear the voice of God incarnate, but only of a man.

Thirdly, we hear the voice of Jesus himself. The divine voice which calls the sick of the palsy to new life, both spiritual and physical. The voice which rebukes with

divine authority the scribes for their closed minds and wicked thoughts. A voice which dispatches the healed man back to his home, to live in sin no more.

What, then, can we seek to learn from this story?

This Gospel narrative can be read as a story of prayer.

In particular, the sort of prayer that we know as intercession. Prayer on behalf of others.

The bearers of the paraplegic's bed take here the role of the intercessors. They come and seek Jesus's help not for themselves, but for the sake of the sick man.

We assume that they are his friends, but we cannot know that.

Perhaps they are his employees. Perhaps they are simply well-wishers, or bystanders who have heard the name of Jesus and who have taken pity.

But what we do know is that they have faith.

Because note that Jesus does not heal the man who is sick of the palsy because of his own great faith, but because of the faith of those who bear him into the presence of the Christ of God.

It is enough that they stand silently with Christ, holding the sick one in His presence, trusting in His divine power.

The pharisees close their minds and open their mouths.

The crowd is too distracted by things external to perceive the internal healing.

But the sick man and his bearers are silent; they clear a space in which to meet their God.

This is a good image and model for our own lives of prayer.

We set aside a space in which to meet Christ.

Free from distraction, free from the need to impress others, free from the tyranny of busyness, and of needing to prove to others that we are important, productive people.

We bring ourselves and those for whom we pray onto our hearts, and invite Jesus to dwell therein; preparing within ourselves a place of encounter.

See again that opening line in our Gospel narrative. Jesus “entered into a ship, and passed over, and came into his own city.”

When we still ourselves, and prise open our hearts, we are making a place that is fit for Jesus to dwell. A temple, a holy house, we might even say that our hearts become “his own city” into which Christ is pleased to enter as the King of Glory.

Now, speaking of temples and holy houses, at this stage I need to pause and say what a truly great pleasure it is to be back at Pusey House, and to be with you all this morning. My thanks to Father George and the Chapter here for inviting me to preach.

This place, more than any other, has shaped my spiritual life. There are dozens of others I know personally who would share a similar testimony.

If you will indulge an Old Puseyite a spot of reminiscing, then I want to share one memory that might help to illustrate this idea of prayer as a dwelling with Christ.

In the two happy years I spent here as Sacristan, it was my duty and my joy to help serve the daily Mass.

As I'm sure is still the case, on one morning each week, the celebrant would consecrate a new host that would be placed in the lunette of a monstrance, ready for Benediction on Friday evening.

To stand on the steps of the altar, within reaching distance, as Christ's body was fitted in the lunette, willingly pierced anew it seemed, that we might later gaze upon it, affected me in quite a visceral manner.

Here was a moment of divine encounter.

A brief pause in the daily pattern of life, in which I felt that my human heart was joined with Christ's sacred heart, in a way which words cannot quite capture.

Well, my words cannot quite capture it, but here is how that great Welshman Rowan Williams put it when he was Archbishop of Canterbury: “[In Christian prayer] You don't send in your list of requests or bombard God with your demands. You just hold the image and sense of a person or situation in the presence of God as if you want to let the one seep into the other...bringing together ... those two realities in your mind and heart”.

We stand with the needs of the world on our heart, and invite Jesus to be enthroned alongside them.

This pattern of prayer conforms us and unites us to the prayer of Jesus who intercedes constantly with the Father for the needs of all mankind.

Here, we might bring in that first reading from Genesis. There is a good Yiddish word, chutzpah, that seems appropriate for Abraham here. The brass neck, the very cheek, to bargain with God about the future of Sodom and its inhabitants.

But of course Abraham is not bargaining with God in a hope of haggling His price down, like a collector at a car boot sale.

It is not Abraham who changes God's mind; rather, it is God who works on Abraham to make him see more clearly the nature of sin, the potential of forgiveness, and the reality of divine judgement.

This story reminds us that prayer is not a passive process. To stand in the presence of God, unguarded and undistracted, is to face the possibility that we shall – indeed must – be changed by Him.

I cannot speak for you, but I know that my heart is not often a fitting dwelling place for the King of Glory.

We humans have the natural tendency to turn inwards. We are selfish, petty, distracted, worldly, unkind, avaricious, pedantic, and greedy.

That is, at least, a good summary of the interior life of the Church in Wales.

But prayer is a powerful and mysterious force.

Prayer invites God's light to penetrate into the dark corners of our souls. For His life is so abundant that it stirs to new vitality that which has become dry, and desiccated, and dead.

Whether praying for ourselves, or interceding on behalf of others, when we stand in the presence of God, we are stepping into a forcefield of divine energy which has the potential to shape and mould us, like red-hot iron is manipulated by a skilled craftsman.

When we pray in faith, our stony hearts are prised open. We are turned, as it were, upwards and outwards. Lifted towards the possibility of meeting God and open to the needs of others.

Here we return to the man sick of the palsy.

To be sick of the palsy means to be a paraplegic. This man is unable to move his limbs. More than this, there is the connotation that he might be physically twisted, contorted into an unnatural and painful posture.

This poor man's illness is a physical representation of his spiritual state. For note that Jesus first forgives his sins, and only then heals his body. The former is infinitely more significant than the latter, whatever the crowd may think.

God in Jesus works on the paraplegic first to straighten out his soul, and then to release his tortured body.

The man sick of the palsy becomes an image for all of us who meet God in prayer.

Whether praying for our own needs, or the needs of others, we trust that God will work like a cosmic chiropractor, loosening the suffering from the debilitating constraints of sin: free to flourish in holiness.

We are all called to be men and women of prayer.

To paraphrase Gabriella Rosetti's famous carol, we might not be able to give to God much in the way of wealth, nor as much time as we might like, nor to praise Him as artfully in song or sermon as others.

But we can give our hearts. We can give them to be temples and tabernacles, places in which the needs of the world might be brought in the presence of Christ, and entrusted to His ever-loving care.

Let us pray:

E NTER our hearts, O King of glory and be pleased to dwell therein.
That with the angels and archangels we might praise thy holy name,
And live our lives dedicated to Thy glory.

AMEN