

Turn from Darkness and Fill the House with Divine Beauty

A sermon preached at the High Mass in the Chapel of the Resurrection, Pusey House, Oxford, on Sunday 3 March 2024 (The Third Sunday in Lent), by The Principal of Pusey House, The Reverend Dr George Westhaver

For ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord: walk as children of light. EPHESIANS 5:8

WALK as children of light. Lent is a kind of journey, a pilgrimage toward the love and wisdom of God, but already in the love and wisdom of God. The journey is a journey towards light, toward a new capacity to see. We go up to Jerusalem, where we shall see with new eyes. We go up to the Passion of our Lord, to His death. This going up is a kind of death in us, darkness is being conquered in us. But we go up not for death, but for resurrection, for the renewal which comes by the trampling down of death by death. What we have in our Scripture readings this morning is a kind of map to enable us to make this journey toward light and in light. We are warned of the dangers of the journey, and we are given practical instruction about how to arrive at our destination. It has negative and positive elements. We are invited to turn our backs on darkness, not just to clean out of the house of our souls, but to seek to let divine light fill this house and our lives.

Today is the third week in a row that we hear about devils – on the First Sunday in Lent, the Spirit drives the Lord into the wilderness where He is tempted in three different ways; last week, the Canaanite woman came seeking help because her daughter was grievously tormented, vexed, by a devil; and this week, our Lord Himself offers a cryptic discourse which reveals something of the work of Satan and of evil spirits. Some biblical scholars have suggested here our Lord is simply a man of His age - speaking of the superstitions of His age. The wisdom of ages and of great theologians suggests that this is very superficial. Here, our Lord reveals something about the character of the moral darkness against which we struggle. It is not just a darkness; we are opposed in our attempt to walk as children of light. Speaking in a series of interviews, almost forty years ago, Pope Benedict XVI offers a helpful description:

The more one understands the holiness of God, the more one understands the opposite of what is holy, namely, the deceptive masks of the devil. Jesus Christ himself is the greatest example of this, before him, before the Holy One, Satan could not keep hidden and was constantly compelled to show himself. So one might say that the disappearance of the awareness of the demonic indicates a related decline in holiness. The devil can take refuge in his favourite element, anonymity, if he is not exposed by the radiance of the person united to Christ.¹

¹ The Ratzinger Report, An exclusive interview with Vittorio Messori, trans. Salvator Attanasio and Graham Harrison, Ignatius Press, 1985, pp. 143 ff.

‘The devil can take refuge in his favourite element, anonymity’. Here Pope Benedict makes an argument which C. S. Lewis made in *The Screwtape Letters*. In the Letters, a senior devil counsels a junior devil that it is best to keep people ignorant about his existence. In the words of the senior devil:

I do not think you will have much difficulty in keeping the patient in the dark. [The patient is the soul the devil wants to destroy.] The fact that ‘devils’ are predominately *comic* figures in the modern imagination will help you. If any faint suspicion of your existence begins to arise in his mind, suggest to him a picture of something in red tights, and persuade him that since he cannot believe in that (it is an old textbook method of confusing them) he therefore cannot believe in you.²

There is a lot which is confused and false about popular descriptions or ideas of devils or the demonic. It is possible to be too interested in them. However, it is also a trick of the devil to use those confusions to conceal himself. Devils appear so often near our Lord because His light reveals them.

This is a big topic, so I will say just a few things. Satan and evil spirits were part of God’s good creation, before the foundation of the world. Scripture describes the devils as fallen angels, angels who turned from God, and who then used power and perverted wisdom to attack human beings made in the image of God.

‘What does the devil do? The names of the devil help – διαβάλλειν (diaballein) means “to throw apart,” “to scatter”, to split apart. The great sign of the demonic is splitting apart, breaking up what belongs together. God is a great gathering force. Whenever things come together, when a community forms, that is a sign of the Holy Spirit. The scattering power is a sign of the darker powers. Satan, Satanas, is the Greek word based on the Hebrew word that means “the accuser.” Satan leads us to point our finger...³

Satan leads us to point our finger, to blame, to accuse in a destructive way. This is not discernment, not seeking to understand, this is the kind of accusation which does not seek diagnosis so much as destruction, accusation which tears down and splits apart. We can do this with others, and with ourselves – we can tell ourselves that we are not worthy of forgiveness, that we cannot hope for love.

This turning people against each other can take horrible forms in cruelty, war, and genocide, or this splitting apart, this accusation, can happen in very normal ways. In C S Lewis’ account, the senior devil tells the junior devil to encourage his patient to find fault in the people he worships with on Sundays: ‘Provided that any of those neighbours sing out of tune, or have boots that squeak, or double chins, or odd clothes, the patient will quite easily believe that their religion must therefore be somehow ridiculous’. You can see here that the devil fundamentally attacks the Incarnation, the wonderful revelation that God has come in the flesh. We manifest the light of the Spirit imperfectly, and the kind of vision we need is a vision which sees the light shining in the darkness, which sees how Christ is taking shape in us even in the midst of all our imperfections. The devil wants us to see the darkness in each other, not the light. We cooperate with the devil when we close our eyes to the work of the Spirit which is shaping us despite our imperfections and sins.

² *The Screwtape Letters*.

³ Quoting and modifying Robert Barron, ‘The Devil’, Transcript taken from a talk given by Bishop Robert Barron, 2022.

Here we can see perhaps see one of the dangers of too much focus on devils or evil spirits. It is possible to make the devil an easy explanation. When we consider any example of splitting apart on a personal or national level, it's very hard to disentangle the strands of social or personal problems, habits or culture, bad choices or bad habits, ignorance and blindness. Still, the consistent witness of scripture and the saints through the ages is that in addition to the all too human causes or factors we see in evils small and great, there is something more. The forces of light are opposed. Our Lord has trampled down death by death, He has conquered the devil and all evil spirits, and yet the devil and his fallen angels still have a kind of power to influence us. The voice whispering in our ear to tear apart precious bonds which knit us together, the encouragement to mock, to laugh at, to step on, the first green and tender shoots of the fruits of the spirit growing in the life of our sister or brother, or even in ourselves, may be a kind of diabolic temptation. There is a real danger here.

We can, on the one hand, reach too quickly for an explanation which includes diabolic influence, but we are also blind if we do not recognize the subtle work of the father of lies, of Satan, diabolos, accusing, tearing down, or splitting apart. It is not true that more education, more procedures, more laws, will protect us from cruelty, or sickness, or racism, or fanaticism without the light of the life of Christ in us. Education needs virtue, the light of holiness and wisdom, in order to change us. We do not need just information, we need a person, the person of Jesus dwelling in us.

Before we look to the more positive message, let us stay a bit longer with the influence of the power of Satan. When a strong man armed keepeth his palace, his goods are in peace. This description of a strong man armed is a description of the devil. What is the source of the devil's strength? Well, in a large part, we give it, we supply arms to our enemy.⁴ The Son of God has defeated the devil for us. The devil does not have power over us unless in some way we give the devil that power. St Paul exhorts us to walk in love. When we choose to walk in un-love, we walk toward disintegration, away from ourselves and away from God.

In the Epistle for today, St Paul gives a kind of list of the kinds of things we choose which can give the strong man our Lord describes a kind of power over us: here, the short list includes sexual immorality, every kind of impurity, and covetousness.⁵

Covetousness is a kind of desire which splits people apart, and gets in the way of the journey toward God. In Christ, the language of our bodies also expresses the language of our souls. So what we do with our bodies is also part of our journey to God, a message which reappears over and over again in the New Testament. Consent by itself does not define love: love has a character which expresses the character of God who draws all things together. Divine love builds

⁴ This idea comes from John Keble, 'Deadly Peace Of The Unawakened Conscience', Sermon XIX from *Sermons for the Christian Year: Sermons for Lent to Passiontide* THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT, S. LUKE xi. 21. "When a strong man armed keepeth his palace, his goods are in peace."

⁵ 3 But fornication and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is fitting among saints. 4 Let there be no filthiness, nor silly talk, nor levity, which are not fitting; but instead let there be thanksgiving. 5

a community which embraces not just human and divine, but the whole created order.

St Paul also describes ‘obscenity, foolish talk, or coarse joking’ as a kind of imaginative participation in immorality. Holding on to darkness in our words or in our minds is dangerous. Letting our heart go out toward what is unlove is a movement toward disintegration or unbeing, even if we hold back from the actions themselves.

We supply arms to the devil when we choose against what draws us together in Christ. Sometimes we are attacked, sometimes we give arms to the strong man who fights against us.

The last part of the Gospel proclamation for today is very important. We do not make a journey by turning away from something. We are walking in the light toward the light. Negative religion is dangerous. Yes, there is a ‘thou shalt not’ in all true religion. We need to know where the dangers are. But in the end, it is only in the light that we see the dangers. This is very important in Lent. Our efforts to keep a holy Lent can be risky. It is not enough to sweep the house if the house is left empty. We can turn away from our sins, we can confess our sins, and even leave some bad habits behind us. But the house needs to be filled. To hear the word of God and keep it is not just to follow rules. The rules are guides to lead us on to delight in the presence of God. Nothing less than union with God will satisfy, that is, the kind of keeping of the word which is delight and refreshment. When we come to the Holy Communion today, we come to be filled up with divine life. Our longing for God, our hopes, our confession of sin, are all different forms of prayer by which we open the door of our lives to be filled up with the divine life.

Yesterday, some of us here attended a one-day conference on the work of Sir Ninian Comper. Among his other works, Comper is the architect responsible for the beautiful east end of this chapel. With the golden altar, light pouring through the window alive with colour like the stones of the heavenly Jerusalem, Comper gives artistic and liturgical form to the destination of our Lenten Pilgrimage. The golden ciborium, or baldachin, over the altar draws us to the place where our Lord gives Himself to be our food. The east window offers a dazzling presentation of the Son of God gathering the saints of the old and the new covenant together, drawing us into one communion and life-giving fellowship with Him. This drawing together, in the vines of the body of Christ, the answer to the work of Satan tearing apart Our Lord’s victory over death, is put before us in the rood above the altar. But our Life in Christ does not end in death, we pass through the rood, we pass through the veil of Christ’s flesh into the risen life. The chapel of the Blessed Sacrament decorated so beautifully by Comper is a kind of emblem of that risen life in Christ.

Every contact we have with beauty is a kind of contact with God, communion with God. In Comper’s own words: ‘The purpose of the church ... is

to move to worship, to bring a man to his knees, to refresh [the] soul in a weary land.”⁶

One of Comper’s spiritual guides was George Congreve, the Cowley Father, who Comper met here in Oxford and with whom he had a close bond. Congreve described beauty in all works of art as a Divine mystery, a kind of sacrament of ‘the brightness of the Eternal Father’s Glory’.⁷ This beauty is not just our destination, on the other side of the rood as it were. We live in this beauty now. We give attention to the form of worship, how we move, we give attention to music and how we sing, we give attention to all these things because they serve as sacraments in which and through which we encounter divine beauty. In the words of George Congreve:

‘beautiful forms’ will ‘change and pass away’, their beauty is not contained by them, but this beauty is ‘that mystery of fairness [, of divine beauty,] which came through them and touche[s] our Soul [: this is] the Eternal Light which abides.’⁸

The work of Lent is not about the negative. It is true, we engage in a serious struggle with darkness, and we try to see more clearly what is out of order in our lives. But we do all this in order that the house of our souls and the house of our common life together may be filled with beauty, with divine light. To walk in light, is to walk in beauty, in the beauty which radiates from the face of the Son of God, and the beauty which radiates from all created things which bear the stamp of His beauty. When we see that, perhaps it will not surprise us so much that a donkey could speak, and is speaking. That is another sermon.

The invitation to walk in the light, to be filled with light, is a message which reverberates throughout Lent. It was proclaimed in a different form last week when our Lord healed the daughter of the Canaanite woman. Long before the woman came to Him, the Lord Jesus already saw her. Jesus saw her, He saw her daughter, and He knew long before she came that He would heal her. This is His good will toward us now. He sees our needs long before we ask. In His goodness, He guided that woman, as He guides us, to give up the idea that we can bargain with God. His love and goodness is of a different order, beyond what

⁶ J. Ninian Comper, *Of the Atmosphere of a Church* (London: Sheldon Press, 1947; reprinted in Symondson and Bucknall, *Sir Ninian Comper*, pp. 231–46), pp. 9–10, all quoted in The Ven. Luke Miller, ‘Speaking of Beauty with Bated Breath: George Congreve SSJE and the formation of Ninian Comper as a Christian Artist’, *Paper for Oxford Department for Continuing Education conference: Ninian Comper: Reimagining the Modern Gothic Church*, 2 March, 2024.

⁷ Adapted from Congreve, *Spiritual Order*, p. 317, quoted in The Ven. Luke Miller, ‘Speaking of Beauty with Bated Breath’: ‘For Congreve, however, the experience of beauty is equally for “mankind in the mass” and the mystic. He quoted Anselm: “God is absolute beauty” and: “His Only Begotten Son is the revelation of the invisible uncreated beauty of God.” Thus “the beauty of the creature is that subtle indescribable quality in it which you cannot arrest or analyse, which is at once the true artist’s inspiration and despair, because it is a Divine mystery, ‘the brightness of the Eternal Father’s Glory.’” The reference is to Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo* 1.1. The quotation is from a hymn by Bishop James Woodford (1820–85), “Brightness of the Father’s glory”, Heb. 1:3.

⁸ “The world therefore does not need to be beautiful to reveal God, who is indescribable, His beauty the inspiration of all art, but because beyond human capacity, the despair of all artists: ‘[Congreve: Once we have seen this, and understand it, we no longer need to see beautiful forms and lights in nature; their beauty is not in them; they change and pass away, but that mystery of fairness which came through them and touched our Soul, was the Eternal Light which abides. We can seek and contemplate that splendour in our daily private prayer, under the dullest circumstances, and all the pressure of common life.’” Miller, quoting Congreve, *Christian Life, a Response, with other Retreat Addresses and Sermons* (London, 1899), p. 269.

we can ask or imagine. In giving up our claims, in saying that we are not equal to His goodness, we are not worthy, He does not give us crumbs, He gives us His very self. In the face of all that tears down or splits apart, He joins us to Himself. He does not just show us the beautiful, He unites us with divine beauty, He makes the divine beauty to be our food and our drink. We don't just see beauty in Him, this beauty is our refreshment. The sacrament of His body and blood is the ultimate sacrament of divine beauty in human form. So it is for us again today. Thanks be to God for His inexpressible gift, so far beyond what we can ask or imagine.