

Homily for the Fourth Sunday after Easter

A sermon preached at the High Mass in the Chapel of the Resurrection, Pusey House, Oxford, on Sunday, 7 May 2023, by The Reverend Dr George Westhaver, Principal of Pusey House

EVERY good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning. Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth. JAMES 1.17-18

ST James gives us a wonderful description of the good gifts, the perfect gift, which is ours in the Risen Christ. He gives us also a beautiful description of the good gifts which we celebrated and witnessed in the Coronation of King Charles and Queen Camilla yesterday.

First, these past four weeks, we have been celebrating the gift of the Resurrection. What Christ has accomplished for us, He will also accomplish in us. We have been born again by the indwelling Word. Today, in the Gospel, He points us both to the Ascension and the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is expedient for you.

We often imagine that our relationship with Christ is second best. However much it makes sense to think this, it is false.

The apostles were near our Lord, but this was still an external relationship: they followed him. He is nearer to us than to them, He has come with the Father to dwell in our hearts. It is true, this often appears distant, we have only glimpses – He appears to come and go, one little while near, one little while far. But more true than our feelings and fragmentary imaginations is the truth: in Him we live and move and have our being.

Every good and perfect gift is from above. We celebrated this in the coronation of King Charles yesterday. The entire ceremony presents authority and law as a gift from above. The king was anointed with chrism in a ceremony very close to the anointing of a priest, but also very like the anointing of all Christian people. In the Confirmation ceremony in a couple of weeks, those confirmed will be anointed. This sacramental act is both a gift and a proclamation.

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In some ways, this is a very simple statement, one that has been recognised by the great philosophers and poets of different traditions. What is specifically Christian is to recognise that this wisdom has taken on flesh in Christ, this wisdom has come down from heaven in human form, and it is this love, wisdom, and goodness which is the new life which is born in us.

The authority which King Charles received yesterday comes from this authority from above. The laws which he promised and vowed to

uphold and defend are not merely human creations. The best laws are not creations but, in some ways, discovery. With a wisdom like that of King Solomon, those with authority are invited to discern that which serves the good and welfare of the people. We have some laws in the form of revelation. But even those laws which are not directly tied to a form a revelation at their best are a kind of discernment, a working out of principles which are given from above.

Law and authority is a gift, and yesterday King Charles pledged to serve that gift. This law which is given or discovered is a gift, it is a form of light, and lantern to our feet, and a light to our path.

In this place, we are especially invited to see how this one gift is found and looked for in the all the forms of study which are part of the life of this university.

St. Bonaventure ...comments on this text from St. James, and speaks of all the forms of light in all the arts and sciences and sacred scripture, and concludes as follows:

“Thus, it is clear,” he says, “how the multiform wisdom of God, given in Holy Scripture, lies hidden in all nature and in every form of knowledge. Thus it is clear how ample is the illuminative way, and how in everything sensed or known, God himself is present inwardly.”

What a wonderful idea, what an important and illuminating promise: ‘in everything sensed or known, God himself is present inwardly.’

The Canadian theologian Robert Crouse applies this insight to the work of the University, and to all our different forms of searching for the light:

The Light of God is everywhere, in all the arts and sciences, in works of nature and of human ingenuity, and in the perfect gifts of grace. Indeed, as St. John tells us, that light “enlightens everyman who comes into the world.” There is no time or place, and no fragment or creation bereft of light. But to see light only in diversity and multiplicity is not enough: it’s like the incoherence of an image in a shattered glass.

The light which we have in Christ is not incoherent¹ ... In the Incarnation of the Son of God, the multiplicity of light comes into focus, so that we can see the source and unity, the coherence in one point of all the colours of the spectrum, the coinherence of man, and indeed of all creation, in the spring of light which is both source and end.

When we celebrate and seek in the coronation of the King with regard to government, we celebrate and seek in all the work and studies of the university with regard to knowledge in the service of both God and people.

All this speaks to what comes down, ‘every good and perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning’.

¹ Crouse: ‘Salvation’s light is otherwise – it brings the image all together. In the Incarnation of the Son of God, the multiplicity of light comes into focus, so that we can see the source and unity, the coherence in one point of all the colours of the spectrum, the coinherence of man, and indeed of all creation, in the spring of light which is both source and end.’

In the Easter life and in the Coronation, there is also a going up. This going up is the focus of our Lord's words this morning. Let us start with the Coronation.

When C S Lewis wrote to an American friend about the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953, he pointed to what her coronation means for each of us:

You know, over here people did not get that fairy-tale feeling about the coronation. What impressed most who saw it was the fact that the Queen herself appeared to be quite overwhelmed by the sacramental side of it. Hence, in the spectators, a feeling of (one hardly knows how to describe it) — awe — pity — pathos — mystery.

The pressing of that huge, heavy crown on that small, young head becomes a sort of symbol of the situation of humanity itself: humanity called by God to be his vice-regent and high priest on earth, yet feeling so inadequate. As if he said, "In my inexorable love I shall lay upon the dust that you are glories and dangers and responsibilities beyond your understanding."

Do you see what I mean? One has missed the whole point unless one feels that we have all been crowned and that coronation is somehow, if splendid, a tragic splendour.

In the coronation, there is a sort of symbol of the situation of humanity itself: humanity called by God to be his vice-regent and high priest on earth, yet feeling so inadequate...

In the coronation of the King yesterday, it is not just he who is raised up – we are all raised up in him.

Contemplating the Queen's coronation in 1953, Alfred Blunt, Bishop of Bradford, said the same thing as C S Lewis:

Today's sublime ceremonial is in form, and in common view, a dedication of the state to God's service through the prayers and benedictions of the Church. That is a noble conception, and of itself makes every man and woman in the land a partaker in the mystery of the Queen's anointing.²

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The lifting up of King Charles does not require that others be pushed down. Rather, we were all lifted up with him. This is why the framing of Kingship in terms of service is so important. It makes it clear that the model of kingship is the Kingship of the King of Kings, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Ascension: It is expedient for you that I go away.

The resurrection has a destination: the destination is the life of heaven. The paradox is that in going away, our Lord becomes near. When we seek those things which are above, we find ourselves more present to the things of this world. When our love is shaped by the life of heaven, we are able to serve and love one another more freely.

² He continues: 'But also the Queen stands for the soul as well as the body of the Commonwealth. In her is incarnate on her Coronation day the whole of society, of which the state is no more than a political manifestation. She represents the life of her people ... as men and women, and not in their limited capacity as Lords and Commons and electors. It is the glory of the social monarchy that it sets the human above the institutional.'

Ascension is a neglected festival, because it does not fall on a Sunday, and there is no longer a holiday associated with it.

St Augustine writes: “This is that festival which confirms the grace of all the festivals together, without which the profitableness of every festival would have perished. For unless the Saviour had ascended into heaven, His Nativity would have come to nothing... and His Passion would have borne no fruit for us, and His most Holy Resurrection would have been useless”.³

We are invited every year to gather together to celebrate the great festival of the Ascension. We will do this on Thursday week, with one of the Canons of Westminster Abbey as our preacher.

Keeping a festival often feels like a burden; it interrupts so much of what we have planned. That interruption is necessary; it’s not an accident. In moving from the disciples’ despair at the going away to seeing that it is expedient, we too must be changed. Ordering our days and times according to the great works of our Lord’s life is part of this change.

There is something quite precious in how we order our time according to the great events of the life of Christ. When we gather to celebrate together this great day, we are not just engaging in ritual. We are seeking to conform our lives to the life of our Lord Jesus. We are seeking to let our days and times be ordered by His life. On the Ascension, we will seek the gifts and graces which belong to that day.

³ Sermon 53.4 in *He Ascended into Heaven*, J G Davies, Bampton 1958, 170.

The Ascension proclaims that human life with all its frailties, suffering, and impermanence is taken into the divine life. What we love and hold dear is given a permanence and preciousness which belongs to nothing less than the life of God. In Him, there is 'no variableness, neither shadow of turning'. We are destined to share in this overflowing of life and truth and goodness. We are destined for it, and by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, this is already our life now.

Every good and perfect gift is from above.

We celebrated and looked for these gifts in the coronation of King Charles, we celebrate and seek these gifts in all forms of learning, and we celebrate and seek these gifts in the Easter life which is being shaped in us.