The Fourth Sunday after Easter
May 3, 2026
Pusey House, Oxford, UK

From the Epistle of St James,

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.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

This Eastertide, as for the past seventeen hundred years or so, the readings for the Sundays after Easter have directed us back to the Cross, to consider it in the light of the resurrection.

On the Octave Day, Christ appeared to his disciples blessing them, breathing the Holy Spirit upon them and sending them. The Cross, then, means not condemnation but mercy and a new life and apostolic purpose.

On the following Sunday Christ crucified was place before us under one of the chief images of Kingship in the ancient world – that of a shepherd. There we saw that the humiliation and shame of the Cross, far from standing over against Christ's Kingship, establish him as the true King. He is the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his beloved sheep, and who, in the words of the ancient hymn, 'reigns and triumphs from the tree'.

Last week in the Gospel the Cross was presented to us as Christ's departure. Horror and despair make his disciples to weep and lament and 'the world' to rejoice. But all the agony of suffering, loss and separation Jesus compares to the pains of a woman in childbirth. In his departure – in his passion, death and resurrection - a new world is born. And to the extent our sorrows become a participation in Christ's sorrows, our lives – his life in us – point towards, and draw us into, that new world, yhe day of resurrection. The Cross heralds a new creation, and the day of resurrection is it's first day, or the eighth day of the old creation, as the early Christians loved to think of it. Even now, in the midst of these birthing pains, as Christians we live in that 'day'. And that is part of the meaning of the Cross, too. Christ exercises divine Providence, tending and caring for us as his beloved sheep. But there is more. Images on the walls of early Christian catacombs sometimes depicted Christ as Orpheus, with the stars as his flock. In this image he is the cosmic Shepherd, the Shepherd of the stars, and the whole creation rejoices in his governance. The whole creation rejoices in the Cross, for all things really are in the hands of him who stretched out his arms upon it 'for the life of the world'.

Finally, on this Sunday, we do not leave behind the vision of the Cross or the theme of God's providential care for his creation. But we look ahead to another departure and another return: his departure by his Ascension, and his return in the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

It is the most natural thing in the world to resist Jesus' departure. Think of the apostles bewildered and defeated at his death. Think of Mary Magdalene, witness to the

resurrection and ‘equal to the Apostles’ as she is styled in Orthodox piety, who reaches out to embrace the risen Christ and is refused. ‘Touch me not’, he says. Under the circumstances, these words must have seemed to her almost inhuman in their severity, and the fact that he turns her away a stunning rejection and rift. And then there is the Ascension. The Apostles have had just forty days with the risen Christ, and he goes forth from them, breaking their hearts once again.

Where are our desires to rest? Christ will not stand still.

> *He is such a fast*
> *God, always before us, and*
> *leaving as we arrive.*
>
> R.S Thomas, from ‘Pilgrimages’

Continually, he goes on before us, and it breaks our hearts.

Our collect today suggests those hearts – the seat of all our desires, longings, hopes and expectations - are a problem. Our collect today calls our ‘wills and affections’ ‘unruly’. They wander. They are not fixed, rooted, anchored. They will not stay still. And so we are as boats without an anchor. The storm may come from within, from our unruly depths, from our passions, healthy and unhealthy, natural or fallen. Or the storm may come from without in the form of those ‘wars and rumours of wars’ of which Christ spoke. Our electronic media are channels of a constant wind, stirring up ‘eddies in the dust of rage’ (Bruce Cockburn, ‘Pacing the Cage’) and fear. We may fear the collapse of ecclesiastical and civil institutions on which we have come to rely. We may fear the erasure of customs and norms which provide a kind of map by which to navigate and without which we feel lost. We may fear geopolitical collapse, the degradation of the physical environment, violence and war. There is a steady diet of fear, always readily available. And even apart from modern conditions of life and modern technology, and modern misdoings, as human beings we have always been moved by what the Prayer Book calls ‘the shortness and uncertainty of human life’ – care for the fragility of life, the fragility of all that makes life worthwhile, the fragility and the mortality of the people we love – friends, spouses, children, neighbours.

What is to be done with our unruly wills? Is there any fixed point given the storms within and the storms without? How are our unruly wills – our disordered and divided loves - to be fixed ‘where true joys are to be found’?

With the Father of lights, our Epistle tells us; with the Father of lights, with whom there is ‘no variableness, neither shadow of turning’. Here a rock. We seek to take hold of the Father of lights, or to place ourselves in his hands, or, if in Christ he has placed us between his hands stretched out on the cross, to learn to stay still. Remember George Herbert, working with the image of a small bird caught in a net, struggling in the hands of the one who would set it free? ‘Thou didst note my working breast, thou hast spared me.’ The bird must be still. And then there is T.S. Eliot.

> Because these wings are no longer wings to fly
> But merely vans to beat the air
> The air which is now thoroughly small and dry

Smaller and dryer than the will
Teach us to care and not to care
Teach us to sit still.

From ‘Ash Wednesday’

Teach us to rest between the nail-scarred hands of Christ stretched out The fixed point, our lessons today suggest, is with Christ at the right hand of the Father. And to ascend thither ‘in heart and mind and with him continually dwell’, as the Ascension Day collect puts it, is not to leave the Cross behind. To rest there is to rest between Christ’s nail-scarred hands. The wounds and marks of Christ’s passion remain after his resurrection. He invites his apostles to examine them, to place their hands within them. In Christian art, as you know, after the Ascension Christ still retains his wounds, because they are the marks of his perfection – his perfect love. They are not blemishes. They do not take away anything from him, but adorn him. They make him more human, not less. So St John exiled on Patmos looks through ‘a door opened in heaven’. That door, of course, is Christ himself. And what John sees is Christ - the Lamb, slain from the foundation of the world, in the midst of the altar throne, with all the powers falling down before him. To ascend with Christ is not to leave the Cross behind, for the Cross is the height of union, the consummation of the marriage between heaven and earth, between the divine and the human, between the holy God and the broken creatures of his lost creation. To ascend with Christ in heart and mind is to begin to live here and now in this life as the Bride of Christ, the New Eve, brought forth out of the side of Christ, the new Adam, opened by a spear, and to look for no end to what begins and continues in this way.

What are the scriptures saying? Are we to be unconcerned about those whom we love and for whom we fear? Not if our love has anything of God’s love for them in it, for Jesus tells us in the Sermon on the Mount that not a sparrow falls to the ground apart from his knowledge and care. Are we to hide from the news, bury our heads in the sand?

Not if we receive what is said in the opening pages of Genesis, when God declares what he has created ‘good’, and the whole ‘very good’.

Not if we trace the loving purposes of God for his lost creation in the pages and the books that follow.

Not if we receive Christ’s words when he declared that he had come to give himself for the life of the world.

Not if it is true as our Epistle says that we have been made the children of God, akin to the Son of God, in whom one might therefore expect to find a family resemblance to Christ and the Father, a similar love. But this is just what our Epistle says. ‘Of his own will begat he us with the Word of truth, that we should be a kind of first-fruits of his creation.’ We have been born again, born from above. By our baptism we share in the filial relationship between the Father and the Son in the Spirit. We no longer look at the world or our lives and circumstances apart from the coming of God in the flesh, and his passion, death, and holy and life-giving resurrection and ascension. We have a new perspective, a new starting point.

How will we live our lives in the midst of chaos and temptations to despair? How will we come to that maturity in love and wisdom that lives with hearts fixed ‘where true joys are to be found’? I can’t say those words without thinking of the words of that wonderful hymn, ‘Now in the meanwhile with hearts held on high’ – living in this strange age between the fall and the fulness of the Kingdom, living ‘with hearts held on high’. Not by giving ourselves over to fear and anger. As our Epistle says, ‘Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; for the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God.’ And surely the despair of man, the anxiety of man, worketh not the righteousness of God, either. Our healing will not be our doing, the result of our choices, the exercise of our wills, the fruit of some elaborate self-help program. St James goes on, ‘Wherefore lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness’ – that is, all the fruits of despair – ‘and receive with meekness the engrafted Word, which is able to save your souls.’ Receive Christ come in the flesh. Receive Christ crucified, risen, ascended, and glorified. Receive Christ come to you in a physical world through which he is present to us in beauty and in glory and in truth. Receive Christ come to you in the Sacrament. Receive Christ come to you in those whom he calls ‘the least of these my brethren’.

St Gregory the Great lived in the midst of a world very much like our own, in collapse. The Roman Empire was in the advanced stages of decay. From time to time barbarian invaders burned and pillaged with no one to stop them. The civil and ecclesiastical institutions were part of the same collapse of order. All around the world appeared to be descending into violence and chaos. Years ago, Fr Robert Crouse, perhaps the greatest teacher the Canadian church has produced, speaking of St Gregory, quoted a modern biographer. ‘Though the world failed, he disdained to be discouraged.’ Fr Crouse was speaking at a Theological Conference. It was a time of apprehension and dismay. Many were discouraged. Many wanted to leave, if only they could find some place to go. Fr Crouse, who was not at all a pulpit banger, but a quiet, thoughtful, scholar and man of prayer, banged gently on the podium several times and repeated these words. ‘Though the world failed, he disdained to be discouraged. Though the world failed, he disdained to be discouraged.’

Brothers and sisters, though the world fails, let us disdain to be discouraged. Let us attend to Christ crucified, Christ in the blessed Sacrament of the altar, Christ in the poor, Christ in his Body, to be found in all those improbable folks by whom we are surrounded. The motto of the Oxford Movement was from the prophet Isaiah, ‘In quietness and confidence will be our strength.’ (Is. 30:15) The quietness and confidence that looks to the Cross, and goes on looking, because it knows what the Resurrection has made plain: the Cross is the medicine of the world.

We know, in the words of Fr Crouse, that paradise abides. It is not a contingent possibility that may or may not come to be through the historical process. We are not progressing toward it, nor will our perversities and confusions overcome it or place it beyond us. Paradise abides, and the way to it abides also, because it is Christ. Christ is the way, and to be with him is the end. Both the end and the way abide, because Christ abides. ‘Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.’ As in St John’s vision, Paradise is a city that descends like a bride adorned for her husband from the heavens. St John is talking about the Incarnation and the Cross. That descent is what is

completed on the Cross. The Cross brings the City of God to us that we might begin to live the life that Christ shares eternally with all its citizens here, now, in this life. And yes, we must defend the faith, if that means seeking to understand it as best we can and remove as many barriers to understanding for ourselves and others as possible, by God's help. But much more we must know that it is the faith that defends us against all the spiritual diseases that would reduce us to despair. It is Christ who bears us, Christ who nourishes us, Christ who sustains us, Christ who has taken upon himself all the fragility that breaks our hearts and all the chaos and violence that fill those same hearts with fear and apprehension. Christ's command to us in the midst of it all is to gather up the fragments that remain, that nothing be lost. He sows. He is himself the seed. Our part is to look to the seed that descends to make fruitful the hard waste of our lives and our souls and our institutions and the very earth and ground. And to gather. Gather up the fragments that remain, with understanding and desire, in knowledge and love.

The poets say it best. And so I leave you with a poem by a Canadian priest and poet, Christopher Snook.

> There is a grave conspiracy between sleep and death --
> those little deaths each night that we call slumber,
> and those long sleeps at the end of days that we call death.
>
> So when she asked if the black dragonfly
> on the edge of the civic fountain
> was dead or only sleeping
> (in much the same way she might have asked if
> the waving-man were drowning
> or the drowning-man only waving)
>
> I could only recall this --
> from years of sleep-like-death
> overtaking me each night
> and death-like-sleep
> claiming those I love --
>
> I could recall only this --
>
> from the stillborn child at dawn
> and the vigil at bedsides
> and the quick, violent deaths
> and the slow painful losses --
>
> I could recall only this when together
> we looked at the dragonfly
> dark against the edge of the fountain
> and she asked
>
> still a child

is it dead or only sleeping?

I recalled only this: Everything wakes up.3.

Ancient lectionary – ascetical and doctrinal.

The four senses: literal, allegorical, anagogical, moral

What does the text say?

What are we to believe?

What are we to hope for?

How are we to live?