

Easter 3, The Principal

Deut 6.4-19, 1 Peter 2.11-17, John 16.16-22

A Journey to Love in Inner Space: We see the Risen Jesus by loving him and by entering into his life and love, possessing the land, through a journey of purification.

***What is this that he saith unto us, A little while, and ye shall not see me; and again a little while, and ye shall see me; and, Because I go to the Father?***

“The Russians, I am told, report that they have not found God in outer space. On the other hand, a good many people in different countries claim to have found God or to have been found by God here on Earth.” C.S. Lewis wrote this essay, ‘The Seeing Eye’ in 1963, shortly after the first astronauts from the Soviet Union returned from space. The Russian astronauts declared that they had not found God in space. Lewis points out in a very expansive and helpful way that the kind of God who could be found by space travel would not be much of a God at all. Just another thing or person among things or persons in the world. He says that looking for God in space is like trying to find Shakespeare in one of his plays and expands all of that quite wonderfully.<sup>1</sup> Our readings today address something of the same topic that Lewis does in his essay - how do we come to see and to recognize God? Or we could even ask, if it's not space travel, “what kind of journey that could help us to see and to recognize God?”

Here, we should note - the problem is *our* seeing God, not God seeing or knowing *us*. God is already here. He sees us so completely that God has known from all the hopes we bring with us. He knows what we are afraid of, and what we would rather not admit. He knows when we are feeling unwell or looking forward to something special. God sees us and loves us so completely and actively that being known by the Good Shepherd gives us life and agency. The wisdom and knowledge of the Good Shepherd, both embraces us and holds us in being. But how do we see and know God? Or, in the words of the disciples: “What is this that he saith unto us, A little while, and ye shall not see me; and again, a little while, and ye shall see me; and, Because I go to the Father.” Thankfully, the disciples are confused and puzzled, and probably we are at least a little bit puzzled with them. Our Lord tells them that he will go away in death and the cross, promising to return in the resurrection. He tells them that he will return to the Father in the ascension and promises to return in and with the Holy Spirit, but says more, to us then to simply describe what has already happened.

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<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, ‘The Seeing Eye’, p. 209, in *Christian Reflections*

But this is not a lesson about what has happened -- our Lord tells us about the character of the Risen life, of our lives with him. These are not Farewell Discourses. In the old lectionary of the Western Church and the BCP which we use here, the Gospel passages from the Gospel of St John on the Sundays after Easter describe what the Lord Jesus is doing in his Risen body, in the Church. He invites us to search and to find him in between all the *little whiles* of the Christian life. The Lord Jesus speaks to us today to help us to recognize and to live with the confusion which is the result of the sense of his being present and active in us alternating with a sense of his being absent, having gone away. He tells us that he is present to us in such a wonderful and complete manner that it is better that he goes away, in order to return to live in us. We see and even touch him, after a heavenly and a spiritual manner of course, in the sacrament of his body and blood. Here today, already, we experience our salvation: we see and hear the Risen Lord Jesus in worship and liturgy which makes his presence and character visible to us, coming in and going out among us and in us. He speaks to us in the Gospel, and he speaks to us in all the words of his holy word which point to him and reveal him. We hear him in the voice of our conscience, sometimes very faintly indeed, but we know it. We hear him speaking, whispering, tenderly in prayer. He is and will be the glory we recognize in beauty, and he is the joy in some of our intense pleasures. And, in between these moments intense and obvious or fragile and fleeting, we will struggle to recognize him or to hear his voice. Paradoxically, the hearing and knowing him makes the silence worse.

We can state this much more simply: It is *the love of Jesus* which enables us to see him and to recognise him in his coming in and going out among us. *The Love of Jesus* is C.S. Lewis' 'Seeing Eye'. In the Orthodox Church the third Sunday of Easter is the Sunday of the myrrh-bearing women. These are the women – Mary Magdalene, Mary the Mother of James, and Salome - who come early in the morning to anoint the body of Jesus with sweet smelling spices.<sup>2</sup> We learn from them that even a very imperfect love, a love with a very imperfect knowledge, leads us to Jesus.

They bought ointment to anoint the dead Jesus, not to greet the risen Lord. But they came to the tomb out of love and in love, a very human love for Jesus. [Maybe each one remembered something he had done for her especially, maybe each one could hear his voice speaking still to her.] But when the angel told them that Jesus was not in the tomb because he is risen, he was also telling them that their human love for Jesus was not adequate to the reality of Jesus. The angel was telling them that their human love

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<sup>2</sup> Mark 16.1

for Jesus had reached its limit with the death of Jesus and now they can love the living Christ only if their hearts follow him into his divinity.’<sup>3</sup>

Seeing and loving in a way that takes us into the divinity of Christ is disorienting and confusing. What we love in this way we love and see with ‘the Seeing Eye’ of faith, with the spiritual perception that comes with adoration. On the other hand, it is a great help to see that even the love which starts in a very ordinary way, what he has done for me, what we have seen or known of him in the flesh - all this can lead us to love - and to worship with a divine love and a seeing eye. The love and the confusion of the myrrh-bearing women who are at first afraid blend with the confusion of the disciples in John 16 who do not know yet how to live in the ‘little whiles.’ These two confusions blend to take away confusion and help us to see what it means to love and to see Jesus.

Our human love is not adequate, we have no wine. But in exchange for the water of our human love, whatever we have already as his gift, the divine bridegroom gives us back the wine of the divine-human love with which to see and to love him. Even when we offer our very imperfect human love to God, God gives us back a graced love, a divine-human love for him and in him. We don’t need to travel into space, or somewhere far away, to see God. But we do need to go on a kind of journey. This transformation of our *imperfect* human love into a *graced* human love participates in divine love and life, is a kind of journey. In the words of St Augustine, “For it is not by change of place that we can come nearer to Him who is in every place, but by the cultivation of pure desires and virtuous habits.”<sup>4</sup>

With the myrrh-bearing women we search for the Risen Lord by bringing with us the sweet-smelling spices of pure desire and virtuous habits, or at least the beginning of these. The purification of our desires is a kind of journey or voyage ‘to our native land’, where we see and know the Lord Jesus with his saints.<sup>5</sup> The epistle for today offers a map of this journey of purification: “dearly beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul.” This is an echo of what we heard on Easter Day, “seek those things which are above, hid with the Risen Christ”, and “mortify, put to death, what belongs to the earth.”<sup>6</sup>

C.S. Lewis helps us to appreciate the necessary connection between seeing the Risen Jesus, and the journey of purification. He first says that he did not really have “the experience

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<sup>3</sup> Khaled Anatolios, *Feasts for the Kingdom*, ‘Only Love can see the Risen Lord’, p 197

<sup>4</sup> Augustine, ‘On Christian Doctrine’ Book 1, Chapter 10

<sup>5</sup> Augustine, ‘On Christian Doctrine’ Book 1, Chapter 10

<sup>6</sup> Colossians 3

of looking for God,” rather, it seemed to him that God was the hunter looking for him. Then, Lewis helps us to see this connection between loving and seeing God and putting to death all that opposes love. He became aware of God only when he was on this journey of purification, when he was “making a serious effort to obey his conscience”. In the chapter before we meet the confused disciples in the Gospel of John; today our Lord already described for them this connection between the love which enable us to see him and the journey of purification: “If ye love me, keep my commandments”. This does not mean, ‘if you love me do this other and different thing to prove it’. Our Lord invites us to live in the love with which he loves us, to find our home in the love in which the Father loves him, to love in the Holy Spirit who draws us into this community and union of triune love. This love is manifest in the commandments which express a love ordered toward God and in God, a love which takes us on a journey of purification into the divine life: ‘If ye love me, keep my commandments’.

During the Easter season we read the book of Deuteronomy and the book of Joshua. We read these books not only to contemplate what God has done, but because they offer a road map of the journey of purification toward our native land, into the Risen Life. In the words of the Church father Origen of Alexandria, “the battles in our land”, or in our day, are not “to be conducted against humans”, against certain kinds of people.<sup>7</sup> Rather, we see in Joshua a description of “those wars that our Lord Jesus, with his army and officers (that is, the throngs of believers and their leaders) fights and the Devil and his angels”. For it is [the Lord Jesus himself] who strives with us ‘against spiritual forces of wickedness in heavenly places’, against the fleshly lusts which war against our souls.<sup>8</sup> Note, “fleshly lusts” include not only the hot-blooded passions, but also pride, strife, and idolatry, letting other principles or priorities occupy the place which belongs to God. For Origen, the battles against ‘the Amorites and Perizzites and Hivites and Jebusites’ become our battles against the deadly sins. Looking at this journey into the Risen Life through the lens of these battles, Origen describes our journey of purification:

And yet, if only my Lord Jesus the Son of God would grant that to me and order me to crush the spirit of fornication with my feet and trample upon the necks of the spirit of wrath and rage, to trample on the demon of avarice, to trample down boasting, to crush

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<sup>7</sup> Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, Homily 12, p 121.

<sup>8</sup> Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, Homily 12, p 120. ‘Of those things that were dimly sketched through Moses concerning the tabernacle or the sacrifices and the entire worship are said to be a “type and shadow of heavenly things, doubtless the wars that are waged through Jesus, and the slaughter of kings and enemies must also be said to be “a shadow and type of heavenly things,” namely, of those wars that our Lord Jesus with his army and officers—that is, the throngs of believers and their leaders—fights against the Devil and his angels. For it is he himself who strives with Paul and with the Ephesians “against sovereigns and authorities and the rulers of darkness, against spiritual forces of wickedness in heavenly places.”’

the spirit of arrogance with my feet, and, when I have done all these things, not to hang the most exalted of these exploits upon myself, but upon his cross.<sup>9</sup>

Or, in the words of the Risen Lord, “If ye love me, keep my commandments” seek to live in the love ordered toward God and in God, a love which takes us on a journey of purification into the divine life – “As strangers and pilgrims ...abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul.”

Where to do we begin, how do we even recognize these things? We begin where C.S. Lewis began, with the voice of the Risen Lord speaking in our conscience. He is already speaking to us, inviting us to know him and to love him, to find ourselves in the love with which he loves the Father and the Spirit. The lists which St Paul, St Peter, and Origen give are important, they help us to begin to discern the difference between the voice of the Risen Christ and the voice of the world. But we don’t need to begin where things are confusing. We begin by turning away from those things which we know already to war against our souls. We begin by seeking to put to death the forms of envy or pride which we recognize in ourselves, not somebody else’s battles, we begin with the forms of lust or anger we find in our own hearts. When we make time or space to listen, where is the Lord speaking in your conscience? Start there. If you would find a guide on this journey helpful, you can speak to one of the priests in our community, or to one of your companions on the journey.

It is the Love of Jesus that enables us to see and hear Jesus in the ‘little while’ of his coming and going among us. This love takes us on a journey of purification toward our native land, toward a full possession of the Risen life. To be strangers and pilgrims means that we know that we are on a journey toward a destination. It’s the love of Jesus which enables us to read the map, and it is the love and life of the Risen Jesus, the kingdom of heaven, which is our destination. To be ‘strangers and pilgrims’ does not mean that the world is disposable, or that we don’t care. In divine love, we love the world and one another best. This the positive character of being a stranger and a pilgrim – it describes a love which is wide awake, a love which does not take things, or people, even ourselves for granted, as just being there. Strangers and pilgrims look with wonder at on the ordinary and normal in the light of the Resurrection.

If we are dissatisfied with the land of the Risen life, let’s be honest, let us we ask ourselves if we have given our best in the struggle which Origen and St Peter describe. The fleshy passions, the deadly sins, war against our soul. There is a promise even here: these

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<sup>9</sup> Origen, Homilies on Joshua, Homily 12

enemies of the soul are not who we really are, they are intruders, it is the risen life which is at the core of who we are.

Being aware of our destination enables us to recognize obstacles on the journey. Knowing the destination helps us to tell the difference between what is counterfeit and false, and what belongs to the risen life. Knowing the destination can help us to recognize when even good things become obstacles on the journey. Or, the good things which manifest the goodness or beauty of good, but which are not the final destination, can distract us. Food and drink can have something of the character of a sacrament which gladden our hearts with thanksgiving or join us to one another, of food and drink can distract. It is the love of Jesus which enables us to see the risen Jesus. If that promise seems like one more trial, one more testimony to our not being good enough, if we are asking ourselves how we can grow in love, then we can take heart. This Gospel is written for us. Even this struggle to grow in faith and love is a necessary part of how the love of Jesus is shaped in our souls. The struggle, the longing, testifies to our love for Jesus already, that desire for love means that we are already being shaped in love. All of this was put wonderfully for some of us in a lecture on the understanding of desire, emotion, and affection from David Bennett with the help of St Augustine on Wednesday:

The whole life of a good Christian is a holy desire. Now what you long for, you do not yet see: [A little while, and ye shall not see me; and again a little while, and ye shall see me:] howbeit by longing, you are made capable, so that when that has come which you may see, you shall be filled. For just as, if you would fill a bag, and know how great the thing is that shall be given, you stretch the opening of the sack or the skin, or whatever else it be; you know how much you would put in, and see that the bag is narrow; by stretching you make it capable of holding more: so God, by deferring our hope, stretches our desire; by the desiring, stretches the mind; by stretching, makes it more capacious. Let us desire therefore, my brethren, for we shall be filled.<sup>10</sup>

Let us desire, therefore my brothers and sisters, for we shall be filled. Let us desire to see and know the Lord Jesus in the power in the reality of his resurrection, not far off, here, nearer to us than we are to ourselves. Let us desire to see him where we know that he wants to be found, let us desire to see him in one another, in the world he is renewing, and in the sacraments of the Church. Let us desire therefore, my brethren, for we shall be filled.

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<sup>10</sup> Augustine, Homily 4 on 1 John