

The Power of Love

A Sermon preached in S. Bartholomew, Brighton on the 12th Sunday after Trinity (21st Sunday of the Year C) 22 August 2010 by Father William Davage, Priest Librarian and Custodian of the Library, Pusey House, Oxford

TWENTY-FIVE years ago, when I first came to this church, I heard a sermon which had as its theme, "Arthur Scargill: agent of darkness." Although not a sentiment with which I necessarily disagree, the sermon this morning will be only marginally more controversial and I take as my text:

"The clever men of Oxford
Know all there is to be knowed
But not one of them knows half as much
As intelligent Mr Toad."¹

We live in interesting times. The lineaments of an Anglo-Catholic future in the Church of England, posited on the Apostolic Succession and the authenticity and assurance of the Catholic Sacraments, are almost in place and appear bleak and unaccommodating. The Oxford Movement, attacked from without, betrayed and traduced from within, is no longer the force that it was: a force represented and illustrated by the startling power and confidence of this building. "... all our pomp of yesterday / Is one with Nineveh and Tyre." Like Nineveh and Tyre the glory is over past and it faces its final reckoning, a kind of Armageddon. It looks as if the men of Oxford, men like John Keble, John Henry Newman and Edward Bouverie Pusey, were wrong and that the Church of England was not what they thought it was and not what they called it to be. Perhaps there will be nothing substantial left but the lingering sneer of "salvation by haberdashery" and the disobliging "Mass in masquerade." I am no prophet, so cannot say what the outcome will be: "I do not ask to see the distant scene, one step enough for me."

John Henry Newman, soon to be beatified, looked on the Church of his day and contrasted it with what he had found in his studies of the Church of the past. There was, he observed, a thin formality in religion, dry prayers daily recited by a dry clerk before a dumb congregation, sermons that were moral platitudes, sacraments that were treated as empty of grace, rivalled by a crude revivalism, ignorant and unctuous and tasteless. [See Owen Chadwick, Newman pp 19 - 20] And we can also see that the strength of a secular state which in its liberal humanism, post-Enlightenment orthodoxy is as confessional a state as any theocracy, can be imposed, directly or indirectly, on its established church. In a post-modern world, the last thing that we need is a post-Christian Church.

"... the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night."²

¹ Kenneth Grahame, *Wind in the Willows*

Where do we look for stability in a world of flux, impermanence, in an uncertain and hostile environment? What do we have to offer to the men and women presently sauntering along the Front, or sheltering from the rain this morning, (I was told that the sun always shone in Brighton), spilling out of the pubs and clubs? What do we have to say to such a society? We can say what we have just heard. S. Paul reminded us "not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think anything of ourselves: but our sufficiency is of God."³ A selfish, self-indulgent society, although self-indulgence is better than no indulgence at all, needs to hear the virtues of selflessness, of self-giving, of self-sacrifice. "Be opened," said Our Lord as he made the deaf to hear and the dumb to speak in this morning's Gospel.⁴ Our discipleship is to open ears and loosen tongues, to be "ministers of the New Testament: not of the letter but of the spirit,"⁵ as S. Paul put it, to release our fellow men and women from the constraints and limitations of societal pressures and from the pernicious effects of moral purposelessness and relativism.

The mainspring of that message which we must articulate and live, is that our redemption is effected through and by the power of love. The Sacred Heart of Jesus is an inexhaustible source of divine love and our motto might also properly be that of John Henry Newman, "Cor ad cor loquitur" heart speaks to heart. And our mission, our duty to our fellow men and women, can also be summed up in the words which Newman had inscribed on the cross that until recently marked his grave: "ex umbris et imaginibus in veritatem" coming out of the shadows and the reflections into truth. We owe our fellow men and women the articulation of the terrible candour of insistent orthodoxy.

Yet we cannot speak, we cannot witness, we cannot serve, we cannot be merciful, we cannot love unless Our Lord loved us first. Man is made for relationship, relationship with God in Christ Jesus, relationship one with another, each of us made and created in the image of God. Our earthly love, expressed in our relationships, flows from and is but a foretaste and a foreshadowing of divine love. And the divine love is universal, is all-embracing. Gerard Manley Hopkins put it as poetically in a sermon as in his glinting verse: "All things ... are charged with love, are charged with God and, if we know how to touch them, give off sparks and take fire, yield drops and flow, ring and tell of him." The outcast, the scarred, the despised and the rejected are not beyond its reach. For that love to reach all, to risk, to dare, Jesus must needs die on the cross for our sins in that act of perfect sacrifice, that act of pure, undefiled, selfless love. It is a love hard won, born of blood and suffering, pain and agony, by one who was himself despised and rejected, love born of sacrifice: but what is love other than self-sacrifice? This is not the anodyne androgyny of an emasculated emotion.

For the followers of Christ the cross is the central point, the still point in a turning, frenetic, busy, noisy world: Stat crux dum volvitur orbis: the cross stands where the world turns. As long as the world is, there is inhumanity and much more, and much worse, all made terribly possible by human sin. But always there is the cross upon which hangs the Saviour of the world. "Jesus will be in agony until the end of time," said Pascal. Our Lady knew that as his dolorous Mother watched love die and a sword pierced her own heart. The Beloved Disciple knew that as he felt the stabbing hollowness of love lost. And the Christian who knows this, the human soul who recognises this is the Christian, is the

² Matthew Arnold, Dover Beach

³ II Corinthians 3: 4

⁴ S. Mark 7: 34

⁵ II Corinthians 3: 5

human soul who has the freedom to return time and again "to the silent presence of the hanged God whose love, whose generosity springs from unimaginable depths."⁶

In the Incarnation, the doctrine at the core of the Oxford Movement and Catholic Revival, the mystery of God's love and mercy is translated into a language which we can understand, the language of the perfect human life, perfectly lived, the divine perfectly realised in our humanity, the human perfectly caught up in his divinity. We can engage with the humanity of Christ and aspire to his divinity as the fulfillment of the divine image within us. The Psalmist prefigured this truth and foreshadowed the cross when he wrote, "For look how high the heaven is in comparison of the earth: so great is his mercy also toward them that fear him. Look how wide also the east is from the west: so far hath he set our sins from us."⁷ Connect those two lines, the one reaching from heaven to earth, the other from east to west, from the rising of the sun to its setting, and where they meet, they throw the shadow of the cross onto the world. That cross is an abiding contradiction as the goodness and love of God intersects with the sin of man. In the Christian life, divine grace crosses and contradicts the instincts of our fallen humanity and recalls us from our disobedience and fallibility. We shoulder our cross not as a burden but as the sign and seal of our salvation and the promise of eternal life: as the still centre of our turning world: the animating principle of divine love and human love.

You are at the beginning of the week in which you honour your patron, S. Bartholomew, with a sense of re-dedication; and with Father Vick's retirement after such a notable and dedicated ministry, admired within and far beyond the parish, you are on the threshold of a new phase in your history, and as Anglo-Catholicism faces its most profound crisis from which you cannot be immune or remain unaffected, and within a secular context of change and decay, there can be no complacency, no self-satisfaction, no wallowing in a tradition however distinguished. There is an urgent need to proclaim the Catholic Faith in the midst of the disintegration around us. There is an urgent need to seek out the sad and lonely, the broken and impoverished, the wounded and the seekers after truth, the unlovely and the unloved, to bring them to this temple of God's love. For that love will not forsake them but will transform them. Here the lonely will find friendship, the sad will find joy, the broken will find repair, the impoverished will be enriched, the wounded healed, the seekers after truth, the truth of Christ risen, ascended, glorified, the unloved love beyond their wildest dreams, and all the peace which passes understanding.

And they will find it all in the Sacrament in which we are now engaged, the Sacrament of Christ's Body and Blood, the Sacrament of the Passion and Death of Christ on the cross, the Sacrifice of his love. Hoc est corpus meum: this is my Body. Ecce panis angelorum: the bread of angels made available for us and for all people on this altar, the axis mundi et caeli, the point of articulation between heaven and earth, where earth and heaven meet, where Christ comes to his people, where his sacrificial love is poured out into the world. Here on this altar Christ conquers the hearts of all people. Here on this altar Christ reigns on his throne of glory and in the hearts of all people. Here on this altar Christ commands the hearts of all his faithful people. Christus vincit. Christus regnat. Christus imperat.

⁶ Dr Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, in his address at the Commemoration of the Carthusian Martyrs at Charterhouse 2010

⁷ Psalm 103: 11 - 12