

United Benefice of Old Brampton and Great Barlow

Fr Stanley Monkhouse Sermon Archive

Year B – Lent / Easter / Pentecost / Ascension

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Second Sunday before Lent, Sexagesima, Year B

15 February 2009

Creation Sunday

Proverbs 8: 1,22-31

Colossians 1: 15-20

Gospel: John 1: 1-14

Psalm 104:26-end (for reference during the sermon)

Today's readings are the heart of my theology. These comments are very personal.

The first lesson – look at it – takes us to the moment before the big bang. It is one of those texts through which astronomers, physicists and theologians begin to speak to each other. The moment before creation merges into eternity.

Here is the role and place of Lady Wisdom (Sophia) in creation, created first of all, the crafts(wo)man at Yahweh's side, as the universe emerges from Yahweh's womb.

- Lady Wisdom intermediate between God and creation, between divine and human.
- Lady Wisdom delighting in humanity as Yahweh delights in her.

Biblical (Holy) Wisdom expresses the divine ordering of creation. Human responsibility to God involves living within the harmony of God's order, the order of God our mother.

- Bulgakov: wisdom is 'the nature of God'
- Bulgakov: wisdom is love of love.

Obedience to Wisdom is wise social action.

Wisdom: intermediate between Divine and human.

Remind you of anything?

Over the last 2000 years the church has come to equate lady wisdom to the Son of God before the incarnation: Old testament Christ, if you like.

Look at the Gospel, surely a derivation of Proverbs 8. It describes a pre-existent *something* that is the agent of creation, that we call Jesus of Nazareth. And look at the epistle where Christ is creator and first-born: even Paul likes these ideas.

Sophia, logos, the pre-existent Christ. Wisdom, logic ('word'), the pre-existent Christ. The wisdom present alongside the creator at creation is the as yet formless Christ, Christ before his human birth.

Your brain is hurting: you've never heard of all this? Oh yes you have, every week.

- CW: eternally begotten of the Father
- BCP: Begotten of his Father before all worlds

Now: the Lord rejoices in creation.

Look at the psalm:

- the Lord rejoices in 'things creeping innumerable, both small and great beasts'
- the daily provision of bread and wine recalls eucharist, and *erotic love, longing* love.

The earth is full of the glory of the Divine. Every living thing, every aspect of life on the planet. There is nothing that we do that is not capable of expressing the glory of creation.

There is nothing in the natural cosmos that does not express the glory of the creator. Bacteria. Viruses. Moulds. Fungi. Plants. Insects. Fish. Mammals like you, me. The retina. The hearing mechanism. Every biological function. The solar winds that give us the northern lights ...

In reason's ear they all rejoice,
and utter forth a glorious voice,
for ever singing as they shine,
'the hand that made us is divine.'

So what?

The gospel tells us that we too can become sons and daughters of the Divine. That is the fruit of heeding what he did say. Living according to Holy Wisdom, according to the logos of the cosmos, according to the words of Jesus.

Yes, we mess up. We make decisions based on pride, arrogance, hypocrisy. It's a mess. What matters is our response to this mess. Look how the Divine responded: got his hands dirty in spectacular fashion and became one of us. Let us respond to the glory that is around us by getting our hands dirty and becoming like him.

We could build walls to separate us from the mess. The trouble with putting up walls, as Oscar Wilde's selfish giant found to his distress, is that we also prevent the fun and joy out there from warming our cold hearts. That's what happened to Kay in the Snow Queen, who sought icy perfection, and could be saved only by Gerda's messy tears.

We need to be open to the mess of humanity. We are called to be open to the glory of the Divine that is in every living thing. We are called to enjoy life.

- A task for each one of us as individuals: let us tear down walls that keep us snug and warm within, but that keep the world out. That's why so many old people are lonely.
- A task for the Christian church: let us tear down walls that keep us thinking we're right, but that fail to recognize the validity of others' vision. That's why there are so many religious conflicts.
- A task for individual churches: let us tear down walls that have preserve us in aspic, but that fail to reach out to the community around us. If we don't do that, the churches will die. Remember, obedience to Wisdom is wise social action.

Today's readings are glorious readings. They are a command for us to enjoy and take delight in creation, as does the divine creator. They have cosmic implications for the union of science and theology, for the union of individual and community, for the union of divine and human.

The divine became human so that humans might become divine. The glory of God is human life lived to the full.

Let us stand and say the psalm, and then move straight to the prayers

O Lord, how manifold are thy works ...

... I will sing unto the Lord as long as I live: I will praise my God while I have my being.

3 before Lent, Year B, Septuagesima

8 Feb 2009

modified for baptisms at Barlow

Isaiah 40: 21-end

1 Corinthians 9: 16-23

Mark 1: 29-39

That passage we've just heard tells one of the healing stories. You can look at these in several ways.

You can take the words literally and so ascribe miraculous powers to Jesus. It may be that Jesus did indeed perform miraculous healings. Certainly, inexplicable healings occur all the time, sometimes ascribed to a biological phenomenon, sometimes a supernatural one. We hear of them at Lourdes, at Fatima, at Knock, for example. Sometimes they're ascribed to the intervention of seventh sons of seventh sons, and other such gifted individuals. I have no experience of them, although I have come across ways in which human biology has done the unexpected and inexplicable.

The trouble with taking the New Testament literally is that is that you need to know how the original Greek was used by the writer and by the people he was writing for. For example, in today's gospel the word translated as fever might not be fever as caused by a microbial infection, but may mean agitated, or in a rage. These different 'fevers' call for different sorts of healing.

I'm careful about taking the Bible too literally: to do that is itself a form of idolatry. Remember that middle-eastern people use much more colourful images than we do. Remember that they dramatize situations much more than we do. The Bible needs interpreting. Muslims have less of a problem, because the HK was written in a language that is still living.

So how else can we look at the healing stories? I take *healing* not to mean medical cure. After all, we're all going to die sooner or later, and there is no medical cure of that. Anyway, medical cure of one disease is simply a staving off of something else that kills us eventually. Not recognising that is one reason why so much money is wasted on the NHS.

The way in which I interpret *healing* in the sense of salving, being made whole, restoring integrity, soothing, giving reassurance, much as a child that has fallen over seeks reassurance from a parent.

This sort of healing is what broken humanity seeks. Look at the political situation. Look at the economic situation in which the world is suffering from the greed and foolishness of a pampered few.

Much of the gospel is written to send messages to its readers. Perhaps the message here is that when people heed Jesus' example of how to live life and conduct themselves, it results in a freedom of the spirit: not freedom to do selfishly what we choose, but freedom from the shackles of oppressive human society, expectations and fashions.

We too can be healers. We can become Christs – indeed that is what happens at Baptism. The old life is washed away and we're born again into a life that tries to heed his teaching. This is what it means when we say we're clothed with Christ. We become Christs – agents of salvation for others, and salvation, salve, healing all mean much the same: making life better here and now for others. Never mind what may happen after death. So we're all capable of being agents of healing—that is, agents of reassurance, agents of hope, agents of soothing, fighters on behalf of others—yes, opposing evil can be a saving act, a healing act.

We need not worry that as humans our own faults make us incapable of being healers. It's these very imperfections, when other people see them, that help people to understand one other. When we see someone else's faults, and that they acknowledge them, we feel more kindly disposed to them. This is the first stage of healing. This is why politicians who never acknowledge their mistakes are so scorned. Why spin doctors are reviled. And this is, I regret to say, one of the reasons why church people who appear to have all the answers are sneered at: those who affect superiority. I view it as one of my tasks to make plain my faults for all to see! It was the wounds to Jesus' human body that did the healing work.

All this calls for us to speak to each other from our hearts. Let's put aside any facade of smooth perfection, and acknowledge that we all need healing from our demons within: demons of childhood hurts; or resentments; or addictions to attitudes, to chemicals, to ways of behaving. We all need healing from all the things that are thieves of our true selves. It was Jesus' wounded human body that healed. It is the exposing of our wounded human selves that can heal others.

This is prophetic work. People who call for openness and honesty are always crucified one way or another, but I see no alternative. The world needs openness and honesty as rarely before—and I do not see it much in evidence. *Let all thy converse be sincere ...*

In today's gospel, when Simon's mother-in-law was restored to health, she shows her love by serving those around her. That's a great model for us all. It's what Paul says, amongst other things, in the epistle: if we recognize Christ's healing power—Christ's salvation, we have a duty to heal others, with the sensitivity that their situation demands, and we do so by using whatever means are at our disposal. This is the Lord's work.

Forth in thy name O Lord I go ...

And now to the Lord be ascribed ...

Maundy Thursday Eucharist

Do this in remembrance of me. No matter what we think happens to bread and wine at the prayer of consecration, these words take us back to Jerusalem two thousand years ago. But these words work the other way, too: they bring Jerusalem of two thousand years ago here today, to this place, in this place. And not just the words, but all the action and the whole occasion: the upper room, the meal, Jesus and the disciples knowing that something nasty was going to happen, and the togetherness of the disciples, even the one who had something to hide.

'Do this in remembrance of me' brings it all into the present. That is what sacraments do. And they bring with them all the intervening years as well: all the Christians of the past, all the joys and sadnesses of history. The whole of the past concentrated into the words and action of the consecration prayer: we open the door of Dr Who's Tardis and find ourselves in the vastness of history. This notion of space-time is a bit at odds with western European linear time, but it is inherent in folk-memory, in community-memory, and is very much a living part of middle-Eastern culture, even today. It is Hebrew zikkaron, and, fascinatingly, has something in common with notions of space-time known to the particle physicist.

Every time the Lord's supper is celebrated, the past is gathered up and presented to us. And then in the heavenly banquet, past and present are refreshed and ejected, launched into the world transformed. In an instant, the caterpillar of the past becomes the butterfly of the future. Rebirth. Or, if you prefer astronomy, the entire universe is compressed, sucked into the infinitely dense black hole of crucifixion, the bloody, dirty hole of the crucifixion, and propelled with infinite acceleration, dispersed to create the glorious new universe.

This is a magnificent vision. All Christian theology and history concentrated into the moment at every Eucharist. No wonder we should celebrate it with all possible splendour and theatre and solemnity and joy. The entire cosmos gathered up and borne for an instant by the priest. You can imagine what a great burden is placed on the priest at that brief moment in the holy mystery.

Renewal is a major theme of foot washing too. Imagine Jesus and the disciples' feet. No stout brogues. I doubt that they would have been so lacking in fashion sense as to wear socks with their sandals. Who knows what they trod in. So in washing their feet, Jesus was taking a bit of a risk. Not something that in our over-sanitized clean, 'nice' world, many seek today. This is a cleansing, like Baptism. A washing away of the dust on our feet, of the the past. It's a confession. And as we wash each other's feet we might confess our weaknesses to one another.

In previous sermons I've suggested that we should use Lent to try to see ourselves as others see us, and give up the things that shock us about that vision of ourselves. As we wash each other's feet, we might tell each other of these things, and ask for help in giving up our addictions. In truth, we should be washing each other's feet as a preparation for HC at every Eucharist.

Foot washing was something that Jesus did for his disciples. It is an act of service. It expresses God's will and purpose, and gives us a model to emulate. It brings the past with it, and it shows us how it can be transformed for the future by service to others. It too is a sacrament that gathers up the past for service to the future.

Each of us is a sacrament. Each of us has all our past within us. We are the sum of our memories. All our past is included in our genes – genes from the primeval soup at the moment of creation are in every one of our cells. And, sisters and brothers, all this past is sanctified tonight in these sacraments. We are cleansed. We are fed. We are, and heaven knows I need this, forgiven. We have the meal set out by the gracious father for the prodigal son.

We are accepted, and we are launched for future service. That is why at this Mass we celebrate the institution of the Lord's Supper, and wash each other's feet.

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,
Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
If I lack'd anything.

A guest, I answer'd, worthy to be here;
Love said, You shall be he.
I, the unkinde, ungratefull? Ah my deare,
I cannot look on thee.
Love took my hand and smiling did reply,
Who made the eyes but I?

Truth Lord, but I have marr'd them: let my shame
Go where it doth deserve.
And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?
My dear, then I will serve.
You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:
So I did sit and eat.

Easter 6, Year B, Love

First Reading: Acts 10: 44-48

Epistle: 1 John 5: 1-6

Gospel: John 15: 9-17

Lots of four letter words, or rather one word lots of times.

Our society leads us into the trap of thinking that love is only about sexual love. It certainly is about that, but not just that. Love is sharing, caring, warning, protecting, comforting, teaching, exploring. Love is compassion. Love is about thinking clearly, analysing how gifts can best be used and encouraged. It is about longing for and creating beauty. The one thing it is not about is sappy emotionalism or indulgence.

NT Greek

- storge - parental love
- **agape** - act of will to do good, sharing, self-giving love, giving up for someone else's sake. caritas in Latin, charity debased by modern associations of patronizing and manipulating those seen as less materially endowed.
- **philio** - love of another, to be fond of, emotional
- eros - for Greeks the highest form, longing to possess perfection, lust, beauty. 'Even if eros is at first mainly covetous, in drawing near to the other, it is less and less concerned with itself, increasingly seeks the happiness of the other, is concerned more and more with the beloved. Ratz. So lust can grow into love.

Greek 4, us only 1

Agape and philio in NT.

Some characteristics of love.

Love tells us that there is something other than ourselves.

- love strangers, aliens, despised (Samaritans), neighbour as self
- love one's enemies
- to love our life is to lose it—the self-centered ego, the me first attitude. **This is** the same eternal truth told by The Buddha 5 centuries earlier than Jesus when he taught that self is illusion. Self-obsessedness is curiously lacking in nourishment.

So love is about relationships: Do we have any validity whatever if we keep ourselves to ourselves? Surely it is in our relationships that we acquire our humanity. Fully involved, no detachment. Love affects the lover as much as the loved. And therein its expense. But in the lover there is a constant source of refills. The more you give away, the more you have to give. But it has to be given away. This is love's expense.

Love is sincere. It's not like food where anything will do to fill our bellies – NO. Only authentic love will do. And that is easy to spot. You might think that those deprived of love, children with abusive adults, would be glad of any kind of love. But no. My limited work with abused young offenders makes me certain that they know when they meet authentic love.

Authentic love has no limits, no conditions. The lover can not impose conditions. No strings attached. And this is risky because we can't know what will happen. The moment we put conditions on the love we give away, it stops being love and starts being manipulative abuse. We may be joyful, surprised, delighted. We may get angry or frustrated. This is love's expense.

This morning we have evidence in the flesh of the product of love, and the evidence of our ears of the promises of love as we hear pledges to bring up James George in the way of Divine Love following the example and teaching of Jesus. We acknowledge that because we are human we don't get everything right, but at least we have standards to aim for. And we promise to do the best we can at each moment in the circumstances we find ourselves. We can do no more. Bringing up James will test your capacity for authentic love. You will get things wrong from time to time, and sooner or later you will regret it. But you will be doing the best you can. All this is the costly love, this is love's expense.

Pastors and flock. It is my job to lead you all on your spiritual journey, and like a parent I need to push you, to provoke you, to warn you (premonish you as it says in the BCP). If I am doing my job properly this will cost for you and for me. I will be frustrated, irritated. You will be frustrated and irritated, but ...

Paul: 1 Cor 4: The requirements for a good guide are reliability and accurate knowledge. It matters very little to me what you think of me, even less where I rank in popular opinion.

So I must press on and not be too affected by that, because out of the forge will come a new creation, wrought by hard work.

Parish conference

First the blackening, the consuming fire, the death of the old: *there let it for thy glory burn with inextinguishable blaze*. But then the prize, the alchemist's gold. It is hard work—yes, love has to be worked at. This is love's expense.

Easter Day 2009

*Rise heart; thy Lord is risen.
Sing his praise Without delayes,
Who takes thee by the hand,
that thou likewise With him mayst rise:
That, as his death calcined thee to dust,
His life may make thee gold,
and much more, just.*

Today we celebrate Christ's rising, and what better way than with George Herbert. It is a splendid festival, and, as usual with the Christian story, startlingly relevant to everyday life. Resurrection after crucifixion is not just history, it's about our experience, about what we do to ourselves.

We crucify ourselves by doing things that were done to Jesus: we deny the truth like Peter, we pass the buck like Pilate, we side with the majority in choosing evil like the crowd. We crucify Jesus and we crucify ourselves, that divine core within. And when the enormity and seriousness of what we've done strikes home, we are sick in the stomach, and weep like Peter.

It is at such moments that we're in the empty tomb, we are the empty tomb. We know the desolation of Mary Magdalene when she says 'they have taken away my Lord.' This is the true Mary speaking, completely open, completely vulnerable. It is at these empty-tomb moments that we too are at our most open and most vulnerable. We lose the outer crust of self.

In the empty tomb, Jesus' outer crust, the clothes and headwear, are left in position as if the body has simply dematerialised, and the clothing that had been wrapped around the body has just collapsed. It is as if the butterfly leaves the cocoon of earthly clothing. The butterfly, the imago, unlimited by gravity to the surface of the earth, and soon, at the Ascension, to be unlimited by time. Thus is death transformed.

In the garden, the risen Jesus asks the desolate Mary what troubles her, but through her tears she doesn't recognize him. Not unreasonably, she supposes him to be the gardener.

AND SO HE IS. Listen to these words preached on today's Gospel by Bishop Lancelot Andrewes to King James I on Easter Sunday 1620.

Christ may well be said to be a gardener, and indeed is one. The first, the fairest garden that ever was, Paradise. He was the gardener, it was of His planting. And ever since, it is He That as God makes all our gardens green, sends us yearly the spring, and all the herbs and flowers we then gather. So a gardener in that sense.

But not in that alone; but He it is who gardens our 'souls' too, and makes them like a well-watered garden; weeds out of them whatsoever is noisome or unsavoury, sows and plants them with true roots and seeds of righteousness, waters them with the dew of His grace, and makes them bring forth fruit to eternal life.

But it is none of all these, but besides all these, no over and above all these, this day if ever, most properly He was a gardener. Christ rising was indeed a gardener, Who made such a herb grow out of the ground this day as the like was never seen before, a dead body to shoot forth alive out of the grave.

In the desolation of our vulnerable and unprotected selves at empty-tomb moments, renewal begins. Christian teaching is that just as Jesus bore the venom and cruelty of the crowd then, so he does now. We bring it into the present each time we celebrate HC. We throw our regrets behind us and start all over again. And since guilt is the single most disabling thing that afflicts humanity, this is good news.

All this is resurrection, all this is Easter, all this is Christ Jesus the gardener at work.

Today is the day we're handed the key that unlocks the door of the Easter Garden: the day of which Blessed George Herbert wrote:

*Can there be any day but this,
Though many sunnes to shine endeavour?
We count three hundred, but we misse:
There is but one, and that one ever.*

Ascension Day 2009

Russia, Eastern Europe. So many churches dedicated to ascension and transfiguration. Here: fewer than 40 (cf over 500 to Holy Trinity).

Are we afraid of this great festival? Too poetical, too romantic, too conceptual, too abstract perhaps for the prosaic Anglo-Saxon mentality? Or what?

How can we explain it? I don't know, but let's explore. This is my take on the Ascension

Ascension – the cosmic event

- *Place and time limited.* We can see the Christian story as a saga of the making good of humanity. Divine approval given to being humanity by God taking human form and flesh and entering into all human experience, birth to death and all stations between, happiness, sadness, victim, death. These events took place at *one time* and in *one place*.
- *Place unlimited:* The resurrection moves all this outside the confines of *place* as Our Lord appears to the disciples, apparently haphazardly.
- *Time unlimited:* And the Ascension makes the Christ-event available to the entire cosmos, now outside time as well. To all, in every place, throughout time. From the rising of the sun to the going down of the same; from the big bang with Holy Wisdom in the stardust to the future, whatever that may mean. As the Eucharist concentrates all salvation history into the consecration prayer, so Ascension is a kind of cosmic counterpart that makes Christ Jesus available to all and in all, the bursting of the risen Lord into the cosmos. Entropy reversed.

Ascension – the personal event

God took human form at the incarnation, and now today we celebrate humanity—the risen Lord—being taken back into the Godhead. God returns to Godself, goes deep inside himself before sending another comforter, another strengthener to inspire us. This journey into Godself is a model for the way in which we can journey into ourselves—we *must* journey into ourselves—the better to equip ourselves for service. This is a call to searing self-examination and prayer, the better to gain wisdom and insights in the service of others.

Christ's teaching is for me profoundly psychologically authentic. A personal journey, a journey into oneself, and paradoxically the more one goes into oneself, the more one is free from oneself, and free of oneself. It is painful, as the crucifixion was. The *blackening* of the forge (Jung's *nigredo*) before the transformation to new creation. Personal blackening, personal crucifixion, personal resurrection, personal ascension as we learn to fly. Yes fly – then we become *unlimitedly* available for service to others, as Christ was *unlimited* by the Ascension, and aware of not imposing oneself on others, as Christ never did. It is a leaving behind of self, just as Christ left behind human flesh. An ascension beyond self.

Ascension – the salvation event

We are human beings. Primates (apes not archbishops). There is nothing shameful about this. If there were, why would the Ineffable God have taken the trouble—and what trouble—to become one? God in Christ Jesus took on all our experience, and at the Ascension all this was lifted up into the Godhead. Even our hurts—the signs of being human. The ascended Christ is the wounded Christ (stained glass window), the wounded healer, insulted, spat at, nailed, kicked, beaten, thirsty. By his stripes, his wounds, we are healed—and it is through our brokenness, our woundedness, that we can act as channels of healing for others. We do not need to pretend to be what we're not—that's the sin of Adam and Eve in the garden where they tried to cover up who they were. Humanity with all its imperfections is divinized: 'God became man so that man might become divine'—the interpenetration of divine and human.

Rising above is always a metaphor for release, for a yearning (eros) for better things. Such yearnings are part of the human condition. An abused young man I know in the city aches for better things, and talks in just such terms to look forward to a better life. So ascension as something to aim for.

With Thee
O let me rise
As larks, harmoniously
And sing this day Thy victories:
Then shall the fall further the flight in me.

God became man in order to raise man to God. The ascension marks the end of the work Christ came on earth to do. Christ ascends and takes human-ness with him. The Ascension unites earth to heaven, humanity to Godhead, humanness to divinity: sanctification, divinisation, redemption, call it what you will.

At the beginning I asked how can we explain so few churches dedicated to the Ascension?

Maybe we are too obsessed with the puritan mentality of the BCP, miserable sinners and so on. Maybe we wallow too much in self-flagellation. This is self-obsession. Maybe we are too obsessed with what we are saved from, harping on about the misery of the cross. We need to lift our eyes to what we are saved to: the glory and splendour of the Ascension.

This is why we need the Ascension: to rekindle, restore, our sense of hope in a world where we hear and see too much of the nastiness of humanity, where we hear of people who ignore that longing for the divine, who shut it out. We need this when we hear the bad news that the media seem to like to concentrate on.

Very soon we will be receiving HC so that 'he might dwell in us, and we in Him.' A 17th century Bishop wrote of this: 'He taking our flesh, and we receiving His Spirit which He imparteth to us; so we by His might become partakers of the Divine nature. (Andrewes). This is what the Ascension is all about.

God the Logos became what we are, in order that we may become what he himself is. The glory of God is a living person and the life of man is the vision of God.

Glory to you all, now and always.