

Holy Saturday

Christ is the Morning Star who, when the night of this world is past, brings to his saints the promise of the light of life and opens everlasting day.

Today, Holy Saturday, is for us a day of waiting – a day the significance of which is marked for us not just by the absence of the Blessed Sacrament from the tabernacle in the Abbey Church, but by the Crucifix, the Crucified Christ, standing upright before the altar, reminding us of the events of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, placing directly before our eyes the evidence of Jesus' self-sacrificial love our participation in which will bring about our redemption, satisfying our deepest needs and longings to be loved. It is, then, a day of waiting and prayerful recollection; but, as the day goes on and the time of the Vigil gets nearer, it is also a day of growing anticipation, as we await the night that sees our re-birth, our rising, as sons and daughters of God, brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ.

This morning and yesterday at Matins, we prayed with the Lamentations of Jeremiah, which describe the desolation of the destruction of Jerusalem, and can help us to ponder on the destruction wrought by the execution of the Messiah, the impact of sin, and the consequent suffering. In fact, we can see in these Lamentations Jesus himself, the suffering Messiah, whose passion is spoken of in the figure of the destruction of Jerusalem and the suffering of those within, an event that can be taken as a foreshadowing of Jesus' suffering, death and burial in the tomb. Thus, from the Third Lamentation:

I am the man familiar with misery

under the rod of his anger...

He has wasted my flesh and skin away, has broken my bones...

He has forced me to dwell in darkness

with the dead of long ago.

He has walled me in; I cannot escape;
he has made my chains heavy;
and when I call and shout,
he shuts out my prayer.

But, in the same way as we saw Jesus' cry of anguish on the Cross, 'My God, my God, why have you deserted me?' was not simply a cry of despair, the Lamentation continues:

The favours of the Lord are not all past,
his kindnesses are not exhausted;
every morning they are renewed;
great is his faithfulness.

'My portion is the Lord' says my soul
'and so I will hope in him.'

The Lord is good to those who trust him,
to the soul that searches for him.

It is good to wait in silence
for the Lord to save.

It is good for a man to bear the yoke
from youth onwards,
to sit in solitude and silence
when the Lord fastens it on him,
to put his lips to the dust

– perhaps there is still hope –

to offer his cheek to the striker,
to be overwhelmed with insults.

Thus, the Christian revelation, in the Person of Jesus Christ, even amidst the most difficult of trials, bears witness to hope.

In his *Life of St Cuthbert*, St Bede when describing Cuthbert's suffering in solitude on Inner Farne during his final illness before his death, quoted this Lamentation, applying it to Cuthbert's sufferings: 'It is good for a man to bear the yoke from youth onwards, to sit in solitude and silence when the Lord fastens it on him, to put his lips to the dust – perhaps there is still hope', seeing in Cuthbert's final agonies a participation in the saving death and resurrection of Christ, being part of the journey that would ultimately bring Cuthbert to God. Cuthbert had felt himself called to live the life of a hermit, and in the isolation and solitude of Inner Farne he was able simply to give himself up to God in silence, humble work and prayer, finally yielding his life to the Father in union with Christ his redeemer. The life of a hermit is a difficult vocation – one for which St Benedict says the monk must first be prepared and 'have built up [his] strength and go from the battle line in the ranks of [his] brothers to the single combat of the desert. Self-reliant now, without the support of another, [he is] ready with God's help to grapple single-handed with the vices of body and mind.' St Bede knew this passage of the *Rule* and this is how he pictured Cuthbert's passage from death to life.

Now, we are not all called to the eremitical life – I expect most monks couldn't live that way – but, we are all called to holiness in the imitation of Christ, called to purity of heart, so that ultimately we might be brought to the vision of God; and, for all of us, prayer is vital – in the dual-sense of being both necessary and life-giving; and we can learn more about this from St Bede's description of Cuthbert's final days on this earth and his passing to the Father.

In his portrait of Cuthbert, as really another Benedict, Bede gives us several accounts of Cuthbert at prayer, whether it be out in the hills alone, on a journey, or

perhaps most famously the night vigil he kept in cold water up to his neck after which he was dried and warmed by sea otters, Bede wishing to demonstrate Cuthbert's holiness in being at one with creation. Prayer does, of course, involve words, and we use these to make acts of adoration, of contrition, of thanksgiving, and of supplication, but there is also the wordless desire simply to be with God in love, perhaps what St Benedict means when he mentions a prayer that is 'short and pure'. As Benedict teaches us:

Place your hope in God alone... Listen readily to holy reading, and devote yourself often to prayer. Every day with tears and sighs confess your past sins to God in prayer and change from these evils ways in future.

Benedict is describing one who knows his need of God, his utter dependence upon Him to whom he looks for all that he is and all that he has; and, when it comes to prayer, one for whom ultimately words will not suffice. In the same way as our encounter with difficulty and suffering teaches us that we cannot save ourselves, our serious and committed attempts to pray, in the knowledge of our sins and just what we are like as human beings, can lead us simply to acknowledging God's presence and wanting to remain with Him in love, desiring Him alone. St Paul provides us with good advice for such times:

The Spirit too comes to help us in our weakness. For when we cannot choose words in order to pray properly, the Spirit himself expresses our plea in a way that could never be put into words, and God who knows everything in our hearts knows perfectly well what he means, and that the pleas of the saints are according to the mind of God.

If we are tempted to question the value of this way of praying, or indeed the value of the eremitical life, the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* has the following observation for us:

This one loving blind desire for God alone is more valuable in itself, more pleasing to God and to the saints, more beneficial to your own growth, and

more helpful to your friends, both living and dead, than anything else you could do.

It is a prayer that ultimately forces us to trust in God alone, which is why the author encourages those called to contemplative prayer so warmly to:

Lift up your heart to the Lord, with the gentle stirring of love, desiring him for his own sake and not for his gifts. Centre all your attention and desire on him and let this be the sole concern of your mind and heart.

As a modern spiritual writer puts it, ‘contemplation begins when we no longer meditate, we no longer question, but *we let ourselves be acted upon*’, and we can add, so that our hearts might be made pure. Of course, this is not easy – particularly so, because in the encounter with God in prayer, we also encounter ourselves in relation to Him, and so we learn our inadequacy and our absolute need for Him, an experience which, though ultimately might bring us hope and increase our love, is nevertheless one that is difficult to undergo. In Lent, we are used to choosing our penances, our renunciations for the sake of Christ, but the renunciation of self that this experience of prayer forces upon us is unchosen and as such is a real sharing in the carrying of Christ’s Cross. If we have been fortunate, there have been times when we have known the presence and action of God in our lives. The Cross, which comes to us in the many circumstances of our lives, including aridity in prayer, an experience of the desert, which feel like the absence of God and a failure in faith, accompanied perhaps by despair and a strong temptation to doubt, deprives us of this experience, of this comfort; but, as we see in the lives of the saints, this desert experience is in reality a time of deep encounter with God through which we grow in humility and our hearts are purified. Another contemporary writer offers us the following advice:

The struggle for purity of heart requires keeping one’s heart free from everything that can harm it by causing it to lose its capacity to love...

Suffering easily becomes accusation, bitterness, judgement, worry, etc. This, not suffering itself, is what darkens the soul and causes harm... The most powerful safeguard of a pure heart is the spirit of faith by which we see God's hand in everything that comes to us... This is what the saints did, and made them free. In a letter to her sister Agnes, St Therese of Lisieux compares herself to a weak reed, but one that 'cannot break since, no matter what happens to it, it wants only to see the gentle hand of its Jesus.'

St Bede's linking of the Lamentation for Holy Saturday Matins with St Cuthbert's final agony and death is intended to show us the spiritual reality that an apparent absence of God from our lives, perhaps at times of difficulty and suffering, is actually a moment of deep encounter with God in which we can associate our sufferings with those of Jesus, so that through his suffering, death and resurrection, our hearts may be purified and our lives transformed. A particular difficulty for us of this experience is the need in the darkness of faith to stop relying on ourselves and our abilities, and simply to give ourselves up to God. An account of an episode in the life of St Jerome in the Judean desert might help us:

So Jerome worried and brooded, until suddenly he glimpsed a crucifix that had positioned itself between the dry branches of a dead tree. He threw himself on the ground, beating his breast with firm, sweeping movements...

It was not long before Jesus broke the silence and addressed Jerome from the cross. 'Jerome', he said, 'what do you have to give me? What am I getting from you?' That voice alone put fresh heart into Jerome again and he immediately began to wonder what he could offer his crucified friend.

'The loneliness, Lord', he answered. 'I offer you the loneliness with which I am struggling.'

'Excellent, Jerome', replied Jesus, 'and thank you very much. You have certainly done your best. But have you anything more to give me?'

Not for a moment did Jerome doubt that he had more to offer Jesus. ‘Of course, Lord’, he resumed. ‘My fasting, my hunger and thirst. I only eat after sundown.’

Again Jesus answered, ‘Excellent, Jerome, and thank you very much. I know it. You really have done your best. But have you anything else to give me?’

Again Jerome reflected on what he might be able to give Jesus. Successively he trotted out his vigils, his long psalmody, his study of the Bible night and day, the celibacy to which he dedicated himself as best he could, the lack of conveniences, the poverty, the most unexpected guests he tried to welcome without grumbling and with a not too unfriendly face, and finally the heat of the day and the chill of the night.

Each time Jesus congratulated him and thanked him. He had known for a long time that Jerome had meant very well. But with a half-smile on his lips, he persisted with his questions, asking for more: ‘Jerome, is there anything else you can give me? Or is this all?’

At long last Jerome summed up all the good things that he was able to scrape together from his memory. So when Jesus asked the question one more time he had no choice but, in great perplexity and almost total defeat to protest: ‘But, Lord, have I not given you everything? I have nothing further to offer.’

Then Jesus replied – and it became deathly quiet in the hermitage and in the whole Judean wilderness – and said, ‘But you do, Jerome. You have forgotten something: you must also give me your sins, that I may forgive them.’

When we have reached the end of our strength, when we have exhausted our resources, all that we can do – all that remains to be done, though in order of

priority it is really the first thing to be done, and it takes an encounter with suffering and failure to learn this lesson – is to give ourselves up to the Lord in true humility and love. This is how St Bede understood St Cuthbert's life on Inner Farne; it is the lesson that St Jerome learnt in his desert hermitage; and, it is also the message of the resurrection.

When they had eaten, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon son of John, do you love me more than these others do?' He answered, 'Yes, Lord, you know I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my lambs.' A second time he said to him, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' he replied, 'Yes, Lord, you know I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Look after my sheep.' Then he said to him a third time, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' Peter was hurt that he asked him a third time, 'Do you love me?' and said, 'Lord you know everything; you know I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep.'

In all truth I tell you, when you were young you put on your own belt and walked where you liked; but when you grow old you will stretch out your hands, and somebody else will put a belt round you and take you where you would rather not go.'

In these words he indicated the kind of death by which Peter would give glory to God. After this he said, 'Follow me.'

Now, this passage is obviously part of the the well-known account in St John's Gospel of Jesus' resurrection appearance to the disciples on the shore of Lake Tiberias (or Lake Galilee, as it is otherwise known) in which Peter undergoes a threefold-questioning as to whether he loves Jesus, reversing his threefold-denial of him on the night of Jesus' arrest; and his affirmation of his love for Jesus results in the ministry to 'feed my sheep', to look after the flock entrusted to him on Jesus' behalf, just as Jesus himself would have done.

If we think back a couple of days, this conversation between Jesus and Peter would seem to complete a remarkable change in Peter. We know him from the Gospels

to be somewhat impetuous, but with this to be devoted to Jesus; the spokesman, it would seem, of the disciples, recognising Jesus as the Christ, and the first to pledge himself to him, even to death. But, we also know his weaknesses and failures, above all his inability to stay awake and pray with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane in his time of trial and his denial of him in the courtyard of the High Priest's palace. No wonder Jesus should ask Peter, 'Do you love me?' – and put the question three times.

In the Greek text of the Gospel, two different verbs are used for the verb 'to love'. On the first two occasions, Jesus said *agapas* and Peter responded *philo*, but on the third occasion when Jesus put the same question he said *phileis* with Peter responding *philo*. Of course, Jesus and Peter are most likely to have been speaking Aramaic with each other, and scholars are divided as to whether this difference in the choice of verb has any real significance – *agape* denotes unconditional love (such as God has for us), whereas *philia* denotes (human) friendship – or whether it is simply a stylistic variation. But, if we pursue the idea that there is some importance in St John's choice of verb, then perhaps the dialogue between Jesus and Peter reveals quite a lot about what Peter was being asked, and about how he felt he was able to respond.

So, in response to the Lord's question on the first two occasions, which we can phrase loosely as 'Do you love me as God loves?' or 'Do you love me unconditionally and completely?', Peter rather humbly replies, 'I love you as much as I am able'; and, as we can see, this seems to be good enough for the Lord, because at the third time of asking he appears to lower the bar, so to speak, asking 'Do you love me as much as you are able?' to which Peter can then respond, perhaps with some relief, 'I love you as much as I am able.'

Read in this way, this conversation would seem to indicate that Peter had come up against his limits. When pressed by Jesus, he does not simply rely on his own

strength – the strength of a man who pledged, ‘If I have to die with you, I will never disown you’ – but accepts that what he has comes from God.

Moreover, Peter’s third reply tells us the journey that he has been on from Gethsemane to Tiberias: ‘Lord, you know everything; you know I love you.’ By this, Peter indicates that he has recognised that Jesus knows and understands exactly what he is like, and that nevertheless he is loved by Jesus, and has been redeemed by him. This being so, Peter’s only possible response is one of humble and grateful love: ‘Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.’

In this third response of Peter’s we see the effect of an encounter with the Risen Christ, the Lord who has overcome sin and death, has overcome every form of human weakness, and has experienced in this earthly life the depths of human suffering, even the sense of having been abandoned by God on the Cross on Calvary. In our baptism, we gained a share in Jesus’ death and resurrection, and as Christians the drama of our redemption is played out in our lives: in fact, our faith commits us to allowing Jesus to work out his dying and rising in our lives. This was Peter’s experience, and it is the power of the Risen Jesus that restores him, renews him, and gives him hope, and brings about change – a gradual conforming of his life to Christ.

This transformation we see in Jesus’ prophecy, as St John understands it, of the death by which Peter would give glory to God:

Truly, truly I say to you, when you were young, you fastened your own belt and walked where you would; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will fasten your belt for you and carry you where you do not wish to go.

What Jesus has said will happen, will take place, because Peter has in true humility come to accept that it is the Lord who is in charge of his vocation, and that try as he might have done in the past, it is not he, Peter, who sets the course for it, but the Lord. And the same must be true for us also: we need to accept this not only

intellectually, but to commit ourselves to the Lord completely, just as we are - not as we would prefer to be or, even, as we think that the Lord would prefer us to be: these are twin temptations to be resisted: first, because if we succumb to this temptation we will be relying on our own efforts and not the Lord; and, second, because it is when we stand at the point of our deepest need that we are most truly ourselves before God and allow Him to act most effectively in our lives. It is then, and only then, that the muddle and confusion in our desires, in the ordering of our priorities, and – as sometimes it can be – the mess of our prayer, can be set aright, and finally our sinfulness be set aside that we can come to God. In acknowledging our poverty before the Lord, we set out on the road of deep personal conversion along which the Lord wants to lead us that he might grant freedom to our hearts.

[Jesus] was setting out on a journey when a man ran up, knelt before him and put this question to him, ‘Good master, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: You must not kill; You must not commit adultery; You must not steal; You must not bring false witness; You must not defraud; Honour your father and mother.’ And he said to him, ‘Master, I have kept all these from my earliest days.’ Jesus looked steadily at him and loved him, and he said, ‘There is one thing you lack. Go and sell everything you own and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.’ But his face fell at these words and he went away sad, for he was a man of great wealth.

After this encounter, Peter asked Jesus, ‘What about us? We have given up everything and followed you.’ Rather than rebuking him for his self-centredness, as he does elsewhere in the Gospel, Jesus gives Peter a different sort of reply. Taking what Peter has said at face-value, he tells him that a selfless surrender to God – such as the rich young man was unable to make – brings its own reward, even true freedom. But, and this is the rub, it will also bring persecutions.

‘I tell you solemnly, there is no one who has left house, brothers, sisters, father, children or land for my sake and for the sake of the gospel who will not be repaid a hundred times over, houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and land – not without persecutions – now in this present time and, in the world to come, eternal life.

Jesus might have been referring to the opposition and difficulties that he himself encountered on account of his message, and which Christians throughout the ages have had visited upon them, but he is perhaps also making the point that our encounter with difficulty and suffering can, and should, have the effect of detaching us from our harmful and self-centred preoccupations and attachments, freeing us to follow him evermore truly, evermore lovingly.

When by God’s grace we are able to do this – and in this life, we learn this and progress only by stages – then the reward is not simply a return to us of the things that we have given up to follow the Lord, but rather a ‘new’ gift of them, the ‘hundredfold’ referring, I think, not to quantity, but to a qualitatively different way of understanding, relating to, and using the gifts given to us, flowing from a freer and more joyful love of the Lord: what has been taken from us, if I can describe like this, is now given back in a new and better way; what we are offered – and by God’s grace have the chance actually to live! – is a new, radically transformed life with God, with everything in its proper place, our love and hearts having been purified.

Of course, we don’t always get this right: we know ourselves too well to imagine that somehow everything in our life, including our relationship with God, will just fall into place; rather, we need to learn this lesson many times over, but each time at a deeper level, this repetition – this re-learning – each time having a greater impact on our hearts and our lives. With this in mind, Benedict as ever, gives us good advice that we would do well never to forget, namely, ‘never lose hope in God’s mercy.’

I began these talks by saying that, 'Jesus is alive, and in him we have our life.' As we now arrive at the end of the final talk, let us leave the last words to St Peter, words spoken in the synagogue in Capernaum just as others were abandoning Jesus:

Lord, who shall we go to? You have the message of eternal life, and we believe; we know that you are the Holy One of God.

Glory be to the Father...