

Fifth Sunday of Easter Year B 2021

2.v.21

Fr Stephen Hearn

The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan pithily rewrote Descartes's maxim, "I think therefore I am" as, "I am not where I think, and I think where I am not."¹ I tell myself that I have a fairly good idea of who I am, of my strengths and weaknesses, of the things I enjoy, and which motivate me, of the people I love and trust. I have, thanks to my memory, an understanding of the experiences that have brought me to this point in my life – a sense of who Stephen is, and that, when I say "I love you" or "I am a priest" I myself, at least, am clear what the "I" in those utterances refers to. Moreover, I am pretty clear that I am in control of the "I" who speaks, that being a person means having a "self" which is the true me, which I express in my relationships with other people. For shorthand, I'm going to call this experience of myself "subjectivity".

Well, says Lacan, you may think all this, but you are mistaken. Family, education, religious beliefs, and so on, sure – we're all used to the idea that external things profoundly influence us. But our sense of who we are is defined by our ability to articulate it – to say things in words about ourselves; and, Lacan teaches us, the words we use are already controlled by powerful forces. These forces inscribe in us particular relationships of power – between differentiated races and genders; between producers and consumers; between haves and have-nots; between parents and children, rulers and the ruled. And these forces do more than shape us – they work through us. Indeed, these forces only have power *insofar* as they work through us.

St Paul, that profound philosopher of the self, got there first, of course. For Paul our subjectivity is warped and imprisoned by the flesh.² By 'the flesh', St Paul doesn't mean the physical body, but rather the condition of being trapped and formed by sin. For Marxists, our subjectivity is a product of our place in the capitalist system; for feminists and queer theorists, the binary system of gender politics; for critics of race, the constructions of power based on skin colour and perceived heritage. St Paul was perhaps the first intersectional theorist: my 'flesh' is the place where *all* these

¹ *Écrits*, trans. Fink (2006), p.430. Lacan riffs on *Cogito ergo sum* in various places throughout his work.

² Cf. Rom. 8; 1 Cor. 3

structures together become real in the world, through my action or inaction. I fantasise that my actions are the result only of my decisions, but, in reality, I am unconsciously enacting the fallen structures of the world. Or, as St Paul puts it, “sin working through me”.³ My thinking mind is all too often Sin on the attack – attacking others, attacking me – in Lacan’s epigram, “I think where I am not”. In the process, I lose myself – I am not where I think. To be liberated from the flesh I must become a new person. More precisely, I must become the one person whose subjectivity was free from the corruption of the flesh and whose action in the work therefore always and totally enacted not the structures of sin and oppression but Love: “It is no longer ‘I’ who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.”⁴

Our first reading from Acts picks up the story of Paul just after he had experienced this great liberation himself; and for Paul, as for Abraham, Jacob and Peter, it took the form of a change of name. Here, he is still called “Saul”, the persecutor of Christ – but soon, he will be “Paul”, the preacher of Christ crucified. Throughout the prophets, when God promises salvation for his people, he promises a new name: “And you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord shall give you... You shall no more be termed Forsaken... but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her.”⁵ A change of name in the bible shows two important aspects of conversion. Firstly, a radical change in a person’s relationship with God leads to a radical change in their identity; they are a “new creation”. Secondly, this change is a result of being “called” by God. The idea of being called contains within it both the idea of being named and of being drawn forward. “I have called you by name, you are mine”⁶ says God in Isaiah – and, through the Bishop, to confirmands. Our new identity is not a product of the world as it is – trapped in the flesh – but a *promise* of the world to come: the promise of a people whose fundamental character is one of love for God and for one another.

This new identity is not our private possession – it is not that we get to experience ourselves as discrete individuals but without any psychological hang-ups or self-deception. It’s the mania for being self-sufficient individuals which leads to our hang-ups in the first place; our desire for autonomy and freedom from the power of others to

³ Cf. Rom 7.8-18, esp. vv. 11&17.

⁴ Gal. 2.20

⁵ Is. 62.4

⁶ Is. 43.1

hurt us usually leads us to find ways to hurt them first. The selfhood we receive in Christ is first and foremost a way of being in relation and only secondarily a way of experiencing oneself as an individual. The reason for this is that it is fundamentally how God is. It's not that the Father, Son and Spirit are three individuals who get along just marvellously; it's that what we call God is a mysterious mode of relation that is more intimate than anything we can imagine or describe. In order for us to begin to comprehend it, it was necessary for the relationship between the Father and the Son to be dramatized in the human person of Christ, and for us to be allowed not only to witness it but to experience it. In baptism, the Spirit draws us into the life of God, as we *become* Christ – it is our “Christ-ening” – and therefore share his relation to his Father, able to cry “Abba, Father”.⁷

In today's gospel, Jesus describes this new relationship to him as the branches of a vine. There is a logical distinction between the vine and any given branch, but not a distinction in reality: pruning isn't the removal of something alien to the plant (although the disease in the pruned branch may be) – the branches are *part* of the vine. The crucial distinction in the passage is not between Christ and his disciples, between vine and branches, but between living and dead branches – those which have been removed (or need to be removed because they have become diseased). To be a disciple of Christ is to be as intimately one with him as he is with his Father, to share the same life – the same sap.

This new self is a gift – it cannot be earned; but in order to survive from Baptism until we are finally restored to new life in the New Heaven and Earth, it must be fed and watered through the husbandry of the Church. To remain healthy branches, able to draw the sap of Christ through our capillaries, we must be constantly nourished by his words and sacraments – by meditation on the scriptures and regular presence at the Eucharist. But being nourished by the word of God is more than just being generally edified through listening and reading. The community that produced both our gospel and our second reading, that preserved the legacy of the disciple John, was especially keen on this point. To be a disciple of Christ, to hear his words and receive his life, meant to act in decisive and practical ways. There is no distinction between faith and

⁷ Gal. 4.6

works for John. To have faith in Christ is to perform acts of love; just as there is no distinction between who God is – God is love – and what God does – he loves us. This is why the gospel and letters that bear John’s name bang on so much about love. Our sharing in the life of Christ is not something that each of us has individually, but something that we have *only through* our relationship to one another, that is, through the Church. The Church is the place where human subjectivity is formed by Love and not by Sin; where our being in the world enacts love and not oppression.

In this way, the Church displays the calling of all humanity to share in the life of God. For this reason, the gospel we preach is not just about acts of love between Christians but about the fundamental disposition that all human beings ought to have for one another; a disposition of active, decisive love. This is the depth of the scandal of the withholding of vaccines from the poorest nations of the world – it is not only wrong it is *inhuman*. Being a new creation means allowing my sense of who I am to be given to me by God through the opportunities he gives me to serve others, not to restrict my sense of who I am to what I experience as my own desires. This is absolutely not to say that one should always be martyred to *other people’s* desires – what someone *wants* from me may very well not be what they need from me and what love demands that I owe them. But it does mean that we should ask in any given situation, what is it that love demands I owe this person or these persons; and it means that if we really do this, we will be more deeply nourished by the sap of Christ and therefore more fully and happily ourselves. This turning away from what we think we want – what we usually experience as desire – to what will really nourish and delight us – what we recognise unmistakably as love – is described by theologians as a movement away from concupiscence to Charity, to the greatest of all the virtues, the summit of human experience and the very nature of God. United to Christ through the sacraments of the Church, slowly but surely our desires, our thoughts and our actions become one with his love and will – the love and will of God – and we will be fully, freely, *ourselves*.