

Fifth Sunday of Easter

Fr Peter Groves

John 14.1-12

Christopher Wordsworth, the author of our first hymn, came from no ordinary family. His father, Christopher Wordsworth senior, held the living of Bocking, an archiepiscopal peculiar in Essex which allowed – and still allows – its incumbents to be called Deans. Wordsworth snr was the younger brother of the more famous William Wordsworth, giant of English poetry, and he went on to be Master of Trinity College Cambridge, and Vice Chancellor of the University. He had three sons, and the two who made it into their late thirties both became bishops, Charles Wordsworth becoming Anglican Bishop of St Andrew's, and Christopher being consecrated to the great See of Lincoln. Our Christopher's son John also rose to the purple, and in Salisbury there remains a Bishop Wordsworth school named after him.

Remarkable as the Wordsworth family was, it is the content of Christopher's hymns, not his descent or progeny, which justifies their repetition. This Wordsworth was one of the great catholic teachers of the Victorian church. His published books are many, but few contain any of this great teaching. He produced an edition of the Greek New Testament, which is now an extremely obscure historical work even in the extremely obscure context of textual criticism, the art of deciding exactly which tiny variant of a tiny Greek word should go where. It is also fair to say that Wordsworth's moral theology is long forgotten. Texts of his such as "The Church of England and the Maccabees" or "Marriage with a deceased wife's sister", don't exactly fly off the shelves. No, all his important teaching was done in verse, verse which remains well known because it is also hymnody. Among others he gave us the great Ascension hymn, "See the conqueror mounts in triumph", which some mischievously suggest should be chosen by a bridegroom for a wedding,

for some reason which I can't possibly imagine. Wordsworth also wrote "Hark the sound of holy voices" which graces churches at the time of All Saints, and in the first hymn we sang this morning, Alleluia, alleluia, hearts to heaven and voices raise, he sets out beautifully the Christian doctrine of resurrection.

In our gospel reading, Jesus tells his disciples not to let their hearts be troubled. Instead they should believe, or trust, in him and in the Father. "There are many rooms in my Father's house", he assures them, and among these dwellings there will be a place for them which he will prepare, before returning to take them with him. This is, of course, strange language. The challenge of obeying the command to trust is shown to us immediately in the questions which the disciples ask. "We don't know where you are going", Thomas says, "So how can we know the way?" There is a hint of exasperation in this question, it has the ring of "what on earth are you on about." There is nothing unreasonable in this objection, indeed in chapter

16 the disciples will say to Jesus “Now you are speaking plainly“, presumably implying that he has been speaking far from plainly up until then.

Jesus answers Thomas robustly. “I am the Way, the truth and the life.” The life which is on offer to the disciples, the dwelling in the father’s house which is theirs to expect, is available through, with and because of Jesus. There is no other route. St Augustine expands on these words, explaining that what it means to have life, is to come to the truth, by means of the way. The union with God, with the ultimate truth, is ours by virtue of Christ and the new life into which we are baptised.

The words of our first hymn illuminate this teaching beautifully. Christ is the first fruits of those who have slept, the first to receive and to live the divine life which is the new creation of Easter and the triumph of the resurrection. And he will return to reap the harvest of the end time, when those who share in his resurrection shall be gathered into the divine life which is the truth of

God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But this new life into which we are incorporated is not something which is a long way off, not a distant hope but a present reality. Christ is risen, we are risen – Christ first, and then those who belong to Christ. Wordsworth uses the image of the first fruits, and hence of the harvest, to pray that the power of the resurrection which is the gift of Easter to us all, might manifest itself in the lives of all those who have received it. We are ripened by his glorious sunshine, enlightened by his countenance, that we might be fruitful on earth, and then gathered into glory when the end time is upon us. Our final hymn will make the same point – soar we now where Christ has led, / following our exalted head, / made like him like him we rise, / ours the cross, the grave, the skies.

The final verse of Wordsworth's Easter hymn is a doxology, that is it offers glory to God, and explicitly to the Holy Trinity. But this is not simply an add on, it is the basis of the resurrection life which the hymn has been celebrating. Augustine's

gloss on Christ's words centres upon a Trinitarian understanding of our Easter life. We are drawn to the truth, that is to the ultimacy of the Godhead, by the way which is opened to us in the life, death and resurrection of the Son, and on the journey of life which is breathed into us by the Spirit who is the Lord, the giver of life. It is no accident that after describing himself as "The Way, the Truth and the life", Jesus will say that "He who has seen me has seen the Father, and do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me." These verses, so central to the development of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, reveal to us the dynamic unity of the divine life into which we are drawn, the life where what it means to be divine is to be given perfectly to another in love.

Do not let your hearts be troubled. To trust in God and in the gift of the resurrection is not a matter of gambling with our souls, nor of presuming to think we are special. It is the conscious acknowledgement of the life of God at work in our lives and in our world, and to place ourselves

within that life as the basis of all that we think or know or do. It is, as so often with the life of faith, a matter of letting God be God, of letting go of our self-concern and our anxieties for proof or security or wealth, and discovering that all these things are given to us in the life of God's people, the living as the body of Christ, which is ours in our day to day existence. In the wonderful words of the first letter of Peter "*you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.*"