

Third Sunday of Lent, 4th March 2018

Fr Peter Groves

John 2.13-25

The wonderfully named Augustus Montague Toplady was born in 1740, during the equally wonderfully named War of Jenkins Ear, in which conflict his father, an officer in the Marines, died of yellow fever. Brought up by his mother, and educated at Westminster and Dublin, Augustus entered the ordained ministry a committed evangelical, having been converted during the period in the church's history which we call the evangelical revival. Sadly, the greatest of evangelical preachers, Oxford's own John Wesley, would become a great opponent of Toplady, who in adulthood devoted himself to defending unequivocally the principles of Calvinist predestination.

We remember Toplady now for the magnificent lyrics which constitute our offertory hymn: Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee. Let the water and the blood, from thy riven side which flowed, be of sin the double cure, Cleanse me from its guilt and power. Rich in Biblical imagery, and shot through with that deeply felt sense of intimate need and helplessness, it transcends the theological disputes of the eighteenth century and expresses, in its stark simplicity, our absolutely inadequacy in the face of the all transforming love of God in Christ. If you are looking for a prayer to memorise, you can hardly do better than the tiny couplet, “Nothing in my hand I bring, Simply to thy cross I cling.”

The rock which is split in the wilderness to provide water for the people of Israel is, we are told by Paul in I Corinthians 10, actually Christ himself, the source of all true life. Likewise, in the fourth gospel, the side pierced open by the spear pours forth the water and the blood which, in the

sacraments of baptism and the eucharist, will give and sustain the life of every Christian. But that life will no longer our own, because left to ourselves we just cannot quite manage this business we call human life. When the hymn speaks of the “double cure” which cleanses of both “guilt and power”, it is stating an unreconstructed doctrine of original sin, where we are guilty just by being human.

Guilt is an awkward word here. To call a newborn baby guilty is more than a little problematic. But I think it remains essential for Christians to acknowledge that humanity on its own is not enough. We need the grace of God. And so we need the double cure, the grace which transforms all humanity by uniting it with God, and the particular grace which enables us as individuals to do better in all the messes and mistakes that we are bound to make. We need to be rescued from the state of sin, and from the tendency to sin. Exactly the same point is made when George Herbert says

“Love bade me welcome, but my soul drew back, guilty of dust and sin”. Guilty of dust – adam, dust, the stuff of being human, my share in the carnage of the world – and guilty of sin, because I as an individual am an individual sinner.

Double senses and meanings are essential to the Fourth Gospel, and lie well beyond the scope of a simple sermon. Books have been written on the subject, though I don't recommend that you read them. Instead, read the text, perhaps with a guide that can alert you to what is happening in the Greek in which it was written. In chapter two, from which we heard this morning, we find ourselves moving swiftly from the sign at the marriage feast in Cana – where the abundance of new wine overflows to inaugurate Jesus' ministry of the new creation – to the temple at Jerusalem, where Jesus' first visit is also his most dramatic.

Jesus enters the temple, and drives out those who would use the house of God as a place of financial

exploitation. His opponents, outraged at what they see as sacrilegious behaviour, demand a sign, a miracle, to justify the action. They seek a demonstrable proof of Jesus' identity, or rather they think they do, in order to accept the revolution he brings. Jesus answers them with a deliberate puzzle: destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up. Predictably, his uncomprehending enemies do not understand. What a daft thing to say, they think. This temple took forty-six years to build. But now the evangelist opens our eyes. He was speaking of the temple of his body. And, we are told, when he was raised from the dead, only then did his disciples remember.

What his interlocuters miss, is the double sense with which Jesus speaks. The narrator tells us this explicitly – he was speaking of the temple of his body. But the text tells us also, because at the beginning of the narrative we are introduced to the temple with one particular, standard Greek word

– ieron, a temple of stone, a building for priests – but when Jesus speaks of destruction he uses a different word – naos, sanctuary, the place of divine presence. Now one can overdo these sorts of contrasts – language is fluid, and we often use more than one word to refer to the same thing in a single conversation. But given the fourth gospel’s obsession with double meanings, we need at least to pay some close attention. And if we do, we will realise that the riddle with which Jesus mocks his opponents is itself a sign with a double sense: that which Jesus’ hearers get wrong, they also get right, because the lack of comprehension in the moment will later be replaced by the new world order which is his resurrection from the dead. This ignorance before and apprehension after is in fact the divine plan. To fail to understand is just one stage of understanding, because the new life of the baptised will be a life which has died before it can be raised. The authorities both do not and do understand, because they fulfil the prophecy by destroying the sanctuary which is Jesus’ body, in order that it may be raised in three days.

To understand Jesus' teaching will always also be not to understand, because contradiction, the crossing of two opposing things, is the essence of Christian faith. This is not to buy into an irrational free for all in which nothing makes sense and so we can say what we like. It is to acknowledge that Christian teaching is not "either or" but rather "both, and". The ten commandments which constituted our first reading are still basic to Christian living, even though the law of which they form a part has been brought to completion in Christ. They both are, and are not, an ultimate expression of the divine will. With the same double intent, I cling to the cross, because that cross – that contradiction of life and death, that joining together of heaven and earth, of created and uncreated, of temporal and eternal – is the basis from which all Christian thought and prayer proceeds.

Jesus is the human being who is also the divine sanctuary, and being drawn into that sanctuary is

the both / and which Christians call salvation. It is the knowledge that we are in Luther's famous words, at the same time justified and sinners. The cleft in the rock of Christ in which I hide myself is the space God makes for me in his own life, the opening up of the possibility that, in him, I am both myself and not myself, I am this hopeless human individual and I am also the infinitely beloved child of God, united to the divine life by the one who gives himself for me in life and in death. "Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling."