

Dear Friends,

There is a piece of music called *The Lark Ascending* which has become a favourite in recent years, and which you can hear often on Classic FM. It has a sense of deep peacefulness and serenity about it, evoking the countryside drowsing in summer warmth with the delicate skirls and chirrups of the birdsong spiralling high above. The piece was written by the 20th century British composer Ralph Vaughan Williams, whose music I am greatly fond of. Listening to it you might think he must have been a man of a calm, even temperament, so it came as a surprise to me when I heard that he was capable, from time to time, of exploding in towering rages which could be quite frightening to those on the receiving end. I expect he would have considered himself justified in his reactions, whatever the cause might be, but it sounds as if his anger could be out of all proportion. But then human beings are complex, multi-faceted, and not always consistent in their behaviour, and in a way it is good to be reminded that VW, though a fine musician, could occasionally blow his top as most of us do!

Jesus too of course had moments like this. As a fully human person the Gospels show him displaying a range of human emotions - compassion, sorrow, light-heartedness, frustration - and in the reading for this Sunday fierce anger. What caused his anger was getting God wrong - thinking that God could want sacrifices of animals, with the whole paraphernalia of buying and selling that disfigured the holy temple and reduced it to a market-place. As it happens, the prophets of Israel before him had often said that God does not want sacrifices or offerings, but the heart open to his love, which shows itself in care and concern above all for the poor and needy. Jesus is very much following in this tradition.

It is particularly the Pharisees who come in for his fiercest criticism, which has led to the word almost becoming a term for 'hypocrite.' Not all the Pharisees could have been like that, and many no doubt were sincere and humble teachers of the Jewish religion and law. But there clearly were some who laid down the letter of the law for others to follow and placed so much emphasis on the outward observance at the expense of the inner heart or spirit, ignoring the fact that 'the letter kills, the spirit gives life.' As Jesus says, they lay heavy burdens on others without lifting a finger to help them bear the burdens.

There is an important place for the law, but no amount of correct following of rules and regulations will do one any good if the inner spirit is not in harmony with the outward observance: in any kind of highly organised, formalised religion it becomes fatally easy to mistake the outward practice - rituals, devotions, prayers - for genuine desire to know God and be transformed by God.

This is precisely what Jesus came to tell us: that God is not confined to rules and laws, but is a real presence whom we can know in the depths of ourselves and there allow him to work a transformation of our person in accordance with his love. What then should we make of the Ten Commandments, the cornerstone of the Jewish Law, which we hear as the first reading at Mass on this third Sunday of Lent?

I do not believe Jesus is saying that regulations and practices do not matter and have no place in our religious life. He himself after all was scrupulous in observing the rituals and prayers of the Jewish religion into which he was born. As far as they go the Commandments are still one of the best guides to harmonious living. They are like the civil law, which lays down what you should *not* do and so defines the limits of what you *are* free to do. So long,

for example, as you follow traffic regulations you are free to drive your car where you wish and how you wish. Society could not operate without laws of this kind.

We obey the law because we recognise that society cannot function without it and our own lives would become difficult if not impossible, and also of course to avoid the punishment that would come from breaking it. Our motivation, that is, is concern for our own good, with a bit of concern for the good of others. But God's law of love bids us go beyond ourselves and live for others and for *the* Other who is God. It is a positive outward direction of ourselves rather than a negative inward avoidance of trouble - and this is much more difficult.

We might think of the rich young man who comes to Jesus and asks what he should do to inherit eternal life. He is scrupulous in keeping the laws - which is good as far as it goes - and clearly wants approval for being so good. The mistake he makes is supposing that it is by being good that he has earned God's love, and really deserves it! Jesus will have nothing to do with this kind of self-deception, and bids him go and sell everything he has to give to the poor, and so the young man goes away crestfallen.

It might seem that the demands God is making on us are superhumanly impossible: not just to do the right thing, but to do it to the right extent and for the right reason. So long as we rely on our own powers and strength, it will be impossible, but we do not have to rely only on those: we have the power and strength of God, his overwhelming love, available to us. It is given as a free gift to be received freely. If we think we can earn or deserve it, we make it impossible to receive, because we are too taken up with thoughts of ourself and not truly open to the other. We need to let go of such thoughts and simply open ourselves to God. Lose your life in order to find it, is how Jesus puts it.

The rich young man reminds us of the elder brother of the prodigal son, the one who has stayed at home, kept his nose clean, done everything his father has asked him to do - all very good and proper - but likewise imagines that is by doing all this that he has earned his father's love, and so cannot join in the joy of his younger brother's return: in fact he makes it impossible for him to do so. He too, like his younger brother, has a voyage of discovery to make, to learn that you cannot earn the father's love by what you do yourself, but can only receive it as a gift freely given. 'All I have is yours,' says the father in the story. Take it, be grateful, and let it work its transformation in you. Difficult? Yes, because it goes so much counter to our normal ways of thinking; but impossible? No, with God all things are possible.

By setting himself in opposition to the religious leaders of his day, by showing how God goes far beyond our usual religious ideas, Jesus made himself so unpopular with them that it led him to his death. But he could do no other: once you are seized with the immensity of divine love, you can only go forward wherever it leads: and where it leads is ultimately to our union with God in his kingdom. As we progress through Lent, we can keep that goal in mind as it was pictured for us last Sunday in the shining radiance of the transfigured Christ on the hilltop.

Wishing you a blessed week of knowing God's love for you,

Fr. Robin

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