

A Sermon by the Reverend Timothy A R Cole  
The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost  
Sunday, July 28, 2019

*Genesis 18:20-32*

*Psalm 138*

*Colossians 2:6-15, (16-19)*

*Luke 11:1-13*

In Washington DC all things are possible, and so it is perhaps not a huge surprise that I should find myself last week speaking with a playwright and discussing the relationship between theatre and the liturgy.

It took me back to a day many years ago in the middle of the Edinburgh Arts Festival where the Church I was Rector of then, celebrated the Feast of the Assumption using Mozart's setting of the Coronation Mass. We had some professional singers who were on holiday in Edinburgh at the time, and an orchestra that was performing in the festival fringe to help us celebrate the Mass the music was written for. No doubt, partly because it was a service and therefore free (!), the Church was packed with Festival goers who were in Edinburgh to see some of the hundreds of plays that were being performed around the city. Indeed, the person I was speaking to last week had performed in that same festival some years ago.

Theatre lovers among you and, I suspect many festival goers, may not be aware of the fact that modern theatre in the West emerged directly out of the liturgy of the Church. In the tenth century, as European culture rose again out of the Dark Ages, so first liturgical and mystery plays, and then, later, the modern secular theatre as we know it came into being.

When you think about it, the relationship is obvious. Both theatre and liturgy are live, they are both about a relationship between audience and a deeper truth conveyed through living actors on the stage. Small wonder then, that theatre should grow out of the sacred liturgy and perhaps carry some element of the sacred with it in to the secular space.

The Gospel bids us reflect today on the profound and vast subject of prayer. Well, while that is so, it is a profound and vast subject, yet, for most of us I suspect, it is really more problematic than profound and a less significant part of our lives than we sense it ought to be.

I had another conversation with someone last week about whether we should ask God for things we want. This, given that most of us are already so blest in the way our lives have turned out. To ask for anything seems selfish given how so many people in the world have so much less than us and so much more trouble and suffering that we do. Also, apart from this,

given our very imperfect lives and faltering faith, how can we ever be worthy of God's attention, love and deserving of anything that we might ask of Him?

Today's Gospel gives a very clear answer to this, I think. Jesus reminds us that God is our Father and what Father, does not want to give good things to his children?

"Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

Jesus is saying very clearly, you give good to your children, not because they necessarily need that good, still less because they deserve it. You give good to your children because you love them and they are your children. So it is with our Father in Heaven. "Ask" Jesus says. "Absolutely ask, absolutely ask, seek and knock!" God want's nothing more than that you should. His answer, of course, will be whatever it is. We pray twice every day in the Prayer of St Chrysostum in the Morning and Evening Offices,

“Fulfill now, O Lord, the desires and petitions of thy servants as may be best for us; granting us in this world knowledge of thy truth, and in the world to come life everlasting. *Amen.*”

In all our asking, we remind ourselves that we do not know what is best for us and, any parent will not give what is bad for their children, even if the child wants it with all their heart.

That not knowing what is best, also goes alongside another truth. The truth that we also do not really know who we are or who God is.

C S Lewis, in his still marvelous “Letters to Malcom – Chiefly on Prayer” uses the analogy of the actor on the stage to describe how he sees himself in the act of prayer.

For what I call “myself” (for all practical, everyday purposes) is also a dramatic construction; memories, glimpses in the shaving glass, and snatches of the very fallible activity called “introspection” are the principle ingredients. Normally I call this construction “me,” and the stage set “the real world.”

Lewis points out that, as we stand on the stage before God, we know that we are actors, and that this is a stage. We know that, under the grease

paint there is also the real me, and that out there, in the audience, half seen behind the glare of the footlights, there is God, the one who, alone, sees how we truly appear, and what we truly are.

We can't change that. Our knowledge of our real selves beneath the greasepaint is imperfect and our knowledge of the God we pray to is always only partly correct. Where real prayer begins, Lewis suggests, is when we bring that reality to mind and begin with it.

As he puts it, "The prayer preceding all prayers is "May it be the real I who speaks. May it be the real Thou that I speak to."

That is of course, also the prayer we should pray as we approach the sacred artifice of the liturgy each week. All this, the music, the vestments the aureate Cranmerian language, is simply the stage on which the real you and the real me strive to reach out to the reality of God. The priest and the acolytes and the choir may seem to you like the actors on the stage but, in truth, we are all on the stage here. All of us in grease paint, all of us in role, but all of us knowing, that beneath all that, this sacred drama is drawing us, leading us, to know something more of the truth about ourselves and of God himself.

“Only God Himself, Lewis says, can let the bucket down to the depths in us. And, on the other side, He must constantly work as the iconoclast. Every idea of Him we form, He must in mercy shatter. The most blessed result of prayer would be to rise thinking “But I never knew before. I never dreamed...” I suppose it was at such a moment that Thomas Aquinas said of all his own theology, “It reminds me of straw.”

Aquinas wrote 60 known works including the 5 Volume ‘Summa Theologica’ so that is a huge amount of work to appear to writer as straw!

50 years ago, the Saturday before last, Buzz Aldrin said these words from the surface of the moon.

Houston, this is Eagle. This is the LM Pilot speaking. I would like to request a few moments of silence. I would like to invite each person listening in, wherever and whomever he may be, to contemplate for a moment the events of the past few hours and to give thanks in his own individual way.

In that silence, Aldrin, an elder in the Presbyterian Church, did something that is still not, I think, universally known. He read the verse from John 15:5

—“I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me, and I in him, will bear much fruit, for you can do nothing without me.”

Then as he described, “I poured the wine into the chalice our church had given me. (The minister had consecrated the elements to give to him to take to the moon.) In the one-sixth gravity of the moon the wine curled slowly and gracefully up the side of the cup. It was interesting to think that the very first liquid ever poured on the moon, and the first food eaten there, were communion elements.”

Interesting, and really very wonderful that the first thing humanity did after achieving what literally hundreds of thousands of people had worked for ten years to achieve, was to make central to the this latest act in the drama of human and American history, the central action of the liturgy where we are most truly ourselves and are most truly closest to Christ and God. In Buzz Aldrin, in that moment, the whole Church was present, the whole of humanity was present and, for a moment at least, we were perhaps, as a human race, truly ourselves.

So we reflect on Jesus’ teaching on prayer. We confront the profound simplicity of our position, that of a child seeking to please their Father, to be honest about who we are, and asking him for what we need and want. We

also confront the profound mystery that is the life that is in us and the divine we reach out to.

So to the playwright seeking to be faithful to the world they portray, to the supplicant who is not sure if they dare to ask for what they long for, and to you and me, poor players who strut and fret our hour upon this stage, Jesus says.

" Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you."