

A Sermon
Preached
in the Chapel
of
ALL SOULS COLLEGE
by
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on
Sunday, 3 November 2024

British Airways sent me an email recently with the subject line, 'Last chance to redeem your business class offer'. By 'redeem', I suppose they meant to *receive* it, to win it, to validate it, to bring it to fruition and, of course, to pay the price for it. Our redemption is our being received. Our reconciliation to God.¹ The winning of us, and the paying of the price for us. Psalm 49, which the choir has sung for us this morning, is a warning, and a hope: none of those who trust in their wealth can redeem their brother, nor give God a ransom... 'but God will redeem my soul from the power of the grave, for he shall receive me'.²

Redemption is the central event of this world.

And the characteristic shape or form of events as portrayed in the Bible is the turning of expectations upside down – the utter reversal of the state of affairs and of our condition and even the turning upside down –at least from our limited point of view– of the condition of God: the king of heaven born in a stable, the Messiah executed on a rubbish heap, blessing for the poor of heart, God's will done on earth as in heaven. Resurrection.

¹ Col.1:22

² Ps 49

Jesus said that he had come 'to give his life a ransom for many', and that his blood was 'shed for many for the remission of sins'.³ The idea of redemption through the sacrifice of Jesus is loved of so many Christians; for many others it is a scandal and a stumbling block, understood as this troubling idea: that because God is perfectly just, God's will for us was to destroy us, to make us pay for our sins. But then, later on, God decided to send his son Jesus to die for us instead, and chose to accept that death, instead of ours, as payment.

I will not be trying, this morning, to explain what Jesus said about our redemption. I think that the best response to that mystery is not to sermonize; it is the response that the Choir outlined in the introit from St Paul's letter to the Philippians –and then we heard that same list of instructions read out in the lesson: to rejoice in the Lord always, to be anxious for nothing, and in all prayer and supplication to cry out to God with thanksgiving.⁴

But I do want to point out some features of the context in which Jesus said what he said, that tend to disrupt our preconceptions about it.

The first and most significant point about the context of redemption is what Jesus said at the end of this morning's gospel reading: 'it is not the will of your Father

³ Matthew 20:28, 26:28

⁴ Philippians 4

which is in heaven, that any of these little ones should perish.⁵ The implication is fundamental and radical: it is not the Father's will that one of those children, or you or I, should perish for their sins. Jesus did not die to satisfy a desire for our destruction. God's will for you is not that you should be destroyed. And God does not change. Your redemption, worked out in this material world, at a particular time on this astonishing planet, is with God from age to age, from everlasting to everlasting. And here is the second point that I wanted to make; concerning the timing of our redemption. It looks as if it came *after* our creation and after our sinfulness, to fix that problem. I think that is an artifact of our limited point of view.

I will not try to interpret for you God's experience of time. But it is easy to point out some aspects of *our* deep-engrained sense of time that shape our sensibilities and imaginations –aspects of human experience that, like us, are passing away. There is no reason to project them onto God. Why think that God's experience of eternity is like our experience of time as a sequence of moments, only *longer*? Consider the day: we experience it from our point of view as the rising of the sun, and the going down of the sun, but the one who made the Pleiades and Orion sees the earth wheeling in the fields of heaven, and turns midnight into dawn and darkens day into night, as the prophet Amos put it.⁶

⁵ Matthew 18:14

⁶ Amos 5:8

Futurity is, I reckon, a distinctively human technique for coping with our experience of being, and becoming. The past, as we conceive of it, is our way of coping with a loss. Time is, I suppose, a trick of perspective. We have no reason to think that, from God's perspective, the moment of creation is divided from this Sunday morning, or from the end of this world, or that God's experience of any moment is different from God's experience of all eternity.

We see things, as Saint Paul said, 'as in a glass, darkly'.⁷ Paul said that religious festivals (like this commemoration), even sabbath days, are 'shadows of the things to come; but the reality is Christ'.⁸

These shadows, along with our sense of comic timing and tragic timing and the tenses of verbs and their aspects, and the names of the days of the week, are our temporary, temporizing ways of coping with existence. What mercy, in this current dispensation, to have two very great gifts, two fragile and halting gifts: *memory*, and *induction*. With them we gain anticipation and recollection, and the possibility of adventure. What a fallen world, conversely, in which we dwell in dread of the future, in anxiety for the present, with vain regrets about the past, so that forgetting may be sweet relief. Through pain, through delight, past and future are spiritual and psychological supports for us, like the arm of a sofa while we are toddlers, not

⁷ 1 Corinthians 13:12

⁸ Colossians 2:16

steady on our feet. We cannot even *think* what it is all analogous to, in a new world in which hearts and minds are not trammelled by the intractability of time and its way of closing doors. We suffer grief and dread over every sort of affliction without seeing those evils in their true context, so that it was prophetic when Paul saw, through it all, that

‘...the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed.’⁹

It is something that is so non-obvious from our human point of view.

When the Lord God came down to deliver the children of Israel out of Egypt –to redeem them– Moses told him that they were bound to ask him ‘what is his name?’ God told Moses to tell them, ‘I AM hath sent me unto you.’¹⁰ From the perspective of God, perhaps there is simply one tense- the present?? God is not absent. And no doubt the perspective of God toward every moment, toward all eternity, bears some relation of analogy to our perspective toward what we experience as the present. But we mustn’t for a moment think that we can grasp that analogy. Our experience of the present moment is shaped by the fact that other moments are not present to us. We experience the present as a little transitory jumble of impulses in flux. The

⁹ Romans 8:18

¹⁰ Exodus 3:14

present is like a knitted stitch, which is what it is because the strand of yarn curves elsewhere. There is no sensation, no cognition, no realisation, that is not entangled with the past and the future in a momentary flicker that is passing away.

I know I said a moment ago that God does not change. But how radically God changes. There *was* a time when God *had not* delivered the children of Israel from Egypt, and then a later time when God *had* delivered them. Even to act is to change. Birth as a human being is a change –a mind-boggling change for the God of heaven – but then, a mind-boggling change likewise for each of us who have become, are becoming human beings. In Jesus Christ, God, *with* us, being fully human, changed in every way as we change. Death is a change. Resurrection is a change.

When the people of Israel built a golden calf for themselves to worship, Moses said to the Lord God, ‘Turn from your burning anger and relent from disaster against your people.’ And God relented.¹¹ God turned from his burning anger against Nineveh, and the prophet Jonah was furious. God punished Israel for David’s sin, but then relented to save Jerusalem.¹² Again and again, the Lord ‘remembered his covenant, and relented according to the abundance of his steadfast love.’¹³ You can see a pattern here. God is always the same, always ready to relent, always actually

¹¹ Exodus 32:14

¹² 2 Samuel 24:16

¹³ Psalm 106:45

relenting, from everlasting the same, to everlasting. Time is a trick of our perspective. From the true perspective, God changes *not*.

As for Jesus's attitude to time: being altogether human and altogether God, he had altogether both points of view. He upended the people's attitude to time: 'Take no thought for tomorrow', he said. 'Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.'¹⁴ And of himself, he said, speaking from *both* points of view, and echoing what Moses had heard from the burning bush that was not burned: 'Before Abraham was, I am.'¹⁵

When Jesus taught the people to pray, 'your will be done' I do not think that he meant, '...at some future point in time that has not yet arrived'. If you or I say 'your will be done', without adding 'at some future point', we actually take the perspective of God.

And that brings me to the final point I wanted to make about the context of redemption: redemption involves a form of one-ness with Christ himself.

The Christian understanding of atonement –the act that leads to redemption– is often described as vicarious, and there is something to that. Remember Psalm 49: you and I cannot redeem anyone, including ourselves. The Lord God is the

¹⁴ Matthew 6:34

¹⁵ John 8:58

redeemer. And yet: to see atonement as vicarious is not to see the whole picture, because it is our vocation to be one with Christ, who is –conversely– Emmanuel, God with us. To know Christ is –for a mystery– to participate in what he went through. ‘Buried with him in baptism, you are also risen with him’, Paul wrote.¹⁶

I think it can actually be good and apt to pray for the redemption of a soul, of all souls, for the lost sheep, the little ones. Given God’s love for them, it can be a way of saying, ‘your will be done’. And so it is a way of being one with Jesus Christ. Of being with God.

Henry Chichele established this College for the academic purpose of pushing back the frontiers of ignorance and stupidity, and also for the spiritual purpose of praying for the redemption of people’s souls. How the College has changed. Today, whether and how a Fellow is to pray for the souls of the faithful departed is not College business, nor government business. What a mercy after the infamous wars of religion, what a blessed freedom.

The academic and spiritual purposes of the College go together, I think, because the academic life and the academic enterprise are always needing redemption. And how. No one but God can redeem a soul, but any of us here, according to St Paul, can

¹⁶ Colossians 2:12

redeem the day.¹⁷ You can see through the windows of the Chapel- this day is not over. Any of us can do justice, one to another, to our students and colleagues and those with whom we disagree. And even mercy. This is not impossible.

And we can give alms, an actual literal instantiation of the commercial metaphor of redemption. Just think what the price of redeeming a business class offer could do in the hands of someone who needs it more than British Airways does. The Fellows of the College are shortly to give alms in a quaint symbolic ritual. Let's face it, our tradition has only become a reproach if it symbolizes nothing material.

To redeem the day is to be with God, whose work of redemption is altogether beyond us. Our redemption is with God – if the present tense is the tense I'm looking for – before all worlds, and we are called to be one with Jesus even in his death, and to participate in something we cannot accomplish– the redemption of the world.

I will leave you with a dose of down-to-earth pragmatism from the Hebrew prophet Joel:

'Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God. Who knows? He may turn and relent, and leave behind a blessing.'¹⁸

¹⁷ Ephesians 5:16, Colossians 4:5

¹⁸ Joel 2:13-14

