

## THE FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY 2016

“...Behold, thou art fair, my love; behold thou art fair; thou hast dove’s eyes... .” Song of Solomon

The Old Testament love poem, the Song of Solomon, describes the relationship of Jesus and the Church as that of a Bridegroom and Bride – lovers. In the poem, Christ the Bridegroom woos his spouse, the Church (or more particularly, every individual soul). During the courtship, like so many young lovers, Christ describes his loved one’s eyes: “Behold”, says Christ to the soul, “thou art fair, my love; behold thou art fair; thou hast dove’s eyes”. There is an extraordinary history of commentary on this verse – endless reflections, for example, on the meaning of Christ’s declaration not once but twice that his Beloved is “fair”. But for us this morning I would like to think about the description of the lover’s eyes if only because our lessons this morning are in one sense entirely about vision – the eyes, we might say, not of the body, but of the soul. Thou hast dove’s eyes. For early Christians, this verse referred to the eyes of the heart enlightened by the Holy Spirit, and so one theologian writes: “Christ’s love has dove’s eyes, because every soul which truly loves Him ... is not fired, like hawks, with greed for things without, nor plans evil against any living thing... [It] looks on everything that may happen with [a] simple, gentle, and lowly heart” (Bede). Thou hast dove’s eyes.

Today is the fourth Sunday after Trinity, and this longest season of the Church year began with the suggestion that our growth in virtue, our acquisition of the habits of heaven (which are the themes of the Sunday lessons) begin with a new and different vision of the world – from the gift, we might say, of dove’s eyes. Remember the very first lesson of the season from St

John's Revelation: I looked, and behold, a door was opened in heaven. John was taken up, we heard that day, and the point was to show us that by grace we are enabled to see the world from the perspective of heaven, to know it from the side not of earthly fears but heavenly love. This was the starting point of the season – a new vision: dove's eyes.

The Epistle lesson appointed for today describes this heavenly vision with respect to earthly struggles: "I reckon," writes Paul, "that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed unto us;... For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now. And not only so, but we ourselves... ." St Paul sees the trials and tribulations of earthly life not as opposed to the Kingdom of God, but argues today that they are signs of that Kingdom being born in us. All of creation groans for the Kingdom to come; we groan. Fr Robert Crouse reflected on this mystery in a series of sermons and articles – the mystery that even the travails of earthly life, its struggles, are part of God's good will for us: "Trials and temptations," he writes in one instance, "the dark night of doubt, confusion and uncertainty, are not just unfortunate accidents. In God's good providence, they belong to the very life of faith... ." To see earthly struggle as part of the Divine providence – this is a new vision, it is to have dove's eyes.

The Gospel lesson today describes the practical shape of this heavenly vision. That is, inasmuch as we see things from the side of the heaven, we learn to live as if in heaven. "Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful," we have read. "... forgive and ye shall be forgiven ... ." Mercy and forgiveness: these the practices of heaven. And yet the Gospel describes

impediments to these habits of heaven – impediments, you might say, to the clear-eyed vision of our souls: there are motes and beams, obstructions that prevent us from seeing clearly at all.

For at least one early commentator, the motes and beams of this lesson are intimately connected to one another. Motes are those periodic eruptions that lead us to judge or condemn one another – those impulsive and rash outbursts. They cloud the vision temporarily; but we often get over these eruptions, often have grace to repent of them. But when they are long practiced, these motes are compounded one after another and become beams. The mote of anger, for example, becomes the habit, the beam, of hatred; the mote of lust becomes the habit of sexual exploitation; the mote of violence becomes the horrible destruction in Orlando. The soul that is dominated by these beams quite literally sees the world destructively – that is, it swings its vision of the world like a person swinging a bat, smashing and threatening everything close at hand.

Of course, not every beam is quite so obvious as anger or violence. There are more subtle beams that nonetheless obscure our vision. The wooden beams of sadness, of hopelessness, of despair. These too are beams; these too very often are habits of soul, and they are no less destructive of vision, and no less harmful to our neighbours. “[W]hy beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but perceivest not the beam that is in thine own eye? ...[C]ast out first the beam out of thine own eye, and then shalt thou see clearly to pull out the mote that is in thy brother's eye.”

Trinity Season began with an invitation to a new vision – to see the world as if from the perspective of heaven, to know the world and ourselves in some sense as God knows them. A new vision, new eyes, dove’s eyes. “Thou art fair, my love; thou art fair; thou hast dove’s eyes,” says Christ to my soul, to your soul. Thou art lovely. Those early commentators on the Song asked themselves where these dove’s eyes come from – how does Christ’s lover acquire them? How do I acquire them when my gaze is more often than not hawkish and fearful? What sustains the gentle vision of these eyes in a world where early Christians knew, just as we know, that habits abound that begin as motes but can become beams in our eyes, threatening ourselves and others. How are these heavenly eyes acquired and sustained? Beautifully, it seems to me, those early Christians tell us that dove’s eyes come simply by drawing near to Christ. Our souls, they said, are like mirrors and we reflect whatever we hold close. And so today we draw near to hold our Lord close in the Sacrament of the Altar. His beauty will become our beauty; so much so, we pray, that others may draw near and discover him in us, and so that we may draw near and behold him in one another. We become what we behold.

“Christ’s love has dove’s eyes,” an early Christian said, “because every soul which truly loves Him ... looks on everything that may happen with [a] simple, gentle, and lowly heart” (Bede). Trinity season is dedicated to growth in virtue, but it all proceeds from a new and different vision of the world – from the gift, we might say, of dove’s eyes: to know the world from the perspective of heaven, to know it from the side not of earthly fears but of heavenly love. And so again we draw near with faith, to become what we behold. AMEN.

