

Lent III, March 19th, 2017
Meditation offered by Nathan McAllister

The exposition of themes of pilgrimage in Father Crouse's *Images of Pilgrimage* series moves by a familiar logic. Its historical procession of images reveals the universal contradiction that defines human nature. We are aliens and strangers here, in a strange land. We are prodigal sons and daughters, spending our spiritual inheritance on the lowest things in God's creation. We are, at our core, a unity of opposition, flesh and spirit, to greater or lesser degrees embracing both the lowest and highest desires of our nature.

Thus, Father Crouse's exposition of these themes throughout the pagan, Jewish and Christian traditions is, on one level, a single, universal cry from the wilderness of our human experience. Odysseus' pilgrimage, temptation and longing for home was understood by Greek thinkers as an image of the journey of the soul from its spiritual home out into the confusion of matter and embodiment and, finally, its return back to its divine home. The parallel of this story with the exodus of the Israelites is obvious – despair in a foreign land, travails in the wilderness of pilgrimage and longing for the true home of our origin.

The end of the pagan account for Fr. Crouse, however, is simply this longing. He writes:

From a pagan standpoint, the pure and perfect good, the divine life, is the deepest longing, the highest aspiration, of the human spirit; but alas, its conclusion is impossible; it is a life too high for man ... The distance is too great, there can be no mediation ... To insist on more than that is folly, the flaw of *hubris*, the tragic flaw; it goes too far.

Odysseus' journey home is possible through a mixture of divine aid and his own resources – his cleverness, cunning, inventiveness, ability to see through illusion and resistance to temptation. The end of this journey is a real end, but it's not the highest end for the human soul. He makes it through his wilderness but, as Fr. Crouse points out, is forced to "learn what are the human limitations, and moderate his zeal. His thirst is for a completeness, the divine realm, "the wide world" which belongs to Zeus alone."

The Gospel account, on the other hand, provides not only the recognition of this tension, but also a positive account of the mediation which emerges from it. It is not that the soul is simply meant to bear its pilgrimage and accept its fallenness, but that it is must come to know that in and through this journey lies the means of its salvation; while the confusion of Babel results from "the attempt to take heaven as one's own possession ... at Pentecost, the wilderness of tongues ... becomes the harmonic speech of paradise." Indeed, there is a blurring of the distinction between the two, a "conflation" in which paradise turns out to be "the wilderness transfigured."

This inversion is at the heart of the Gospel. Wine from water; life from death; the weak shall humble the strong; God's Church is built on fishermen; God comes to us and is born in a manger. This continual overturning of the logic of the world points ultimately to the fundamental difference in the images of pilgrimage in the New Testament. The single image by which the rest is ordered is that of God crucified. Fr. Crouse writes:

All this comes into focus with the Cross, which is at once the tree of utter desolation, and the tree of glory; the tree of death, and the tree of life. It is the tree which lifts the brazen serpent in the wilderness, and the tree of paradise, whose leaves are for the healing of the nation. What was, for the pagan hero, tragic contradiction - "foolishness to the Greeks"; what was, for the people of the Old Covenant, shrouded in ambiguity - "a stumbling block to the Jews"; is here reconciled and clarified, as "the power of God and the wisdom of God".

In our surrender is victory, in our death is life. The so called 'evils' of the Christian journey – the oppression of the flesh, the wilderness of loneliness and despair and hopelessness – are the very means by which we share in the life of Christ and are ourselves transfigured and come to know the paradise of God's love. Thus, Christ says to his disciples at the last supper:

Verily, I say unto you, that ye shall weep and lament, but the world shall rejoice; and ye shall be sorrowful, but your sorrow shall be turned into joy. A woman, when she is in travail, hath sorrow, because her hour is come: but as soon as she is delivered, she remembereth no more the anguish, for joy that a child is born into the world. And ye now therefore have sorrow; but I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you (St. John, 16:20-22).

Christ is not speaking here of simply bearing the evil of the world for some future joy; Odysseus did as much. The more radical message is that there is joy in the suffering itself because in and through this wilderness we come to know our own poverty and dependence. This knowledge purifies the soul so that it is able to receive the Grace that is always available yet obscured by our own nature. Thus, Paul writes that we "rejoice in hope", and "glory in tribulations" (Rom., 5:2-3), knowing "that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them that are called according to his purpose" (Rom., 8:28)." Only through true consciousness of our need, brought about by our pilgrimage, is the freedom of slavery to Christ's will made manifest and our spiritual transformation brought about.

In conclusion it is perhaps helpful, in this Lenten season, to point out how intensely practical Fr. Crouse's message is. The result of this Christian inversion is that the most mundane, seemingly insignificant things in our daily life turn out also to be the means of our engagement with Christ. However, the reaching out is by Him. An excerpt from a series of Lenten meditations by J.D. Flynn, a canon lawyer in Lincoln, Nebraska, provides a helpful conclusion. He writes:

Sometimes... we see Lent as a proof of our endurance, an annual test of our strength and resolve as believers. It is easy to think that during Lent, our little sacrifices take us out into the desert to be with Christ. We don't readily see that Christ is the one who has come out into the desert, to be with us. We often have trouble admitting that we are already in the desert, already weak and without food, and already tempted. Often we forget that Christ conquered temptation not for himself, but for us—so that we can rely on him to conquer Satan's lies, which are whispered to us in the moments of great suffering, in the desert of this life. Lent, at its best, is a discovery that Christ is already next to us. We silence our distractions to discover the Lord's love, his steadfast presence, the transforming power of the Holy Spirit.