



Christ Church Cathedral

OXFORD

12 July 2020: Matins Sermon

The Fifth Sunday after Trinity

Romans 12:9–21

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Last weekend I had the huge privilege of joining with 23 new curates for their commissioning on Zoom. They were asked a question from our reading, ‘Will you serve among us as those who weep with all who are weeping and laugh with all who rejoice, witnessing in all things to the hope that is the Kingdom?’ This intimate online service was not what anyone had planned for or expected. Just a few short months ago we had been making arrangements for our normal big celebratory ordination services here at Christ Church – a packed Cathedral, family and friends from across the country and the world, wonderful music from our choirs and a guest worship band. But as with so much, Covid-19 changed everything.

At the heart of ordination is laying on of hands by the bishop and the prayer of the Church, represented by a gathered congregation. So unlike other services it couldn’t be translated online. Those curates have to wait until Michaelmas for ordination to the calling for which they have been selected, trained and formed.

But as we gathered for the rather different purpose of celebrating their temporary authorization as lay workers and their blessing by Bishop Steven for that ministry in their new parishes, it got me thinking about ministry and calling, about sending and staying and about the great saint and Cappadocian bishop whose icon often sits over my shoulder on video calls, Gregory of Nazianzus.

For all that the Church would one day see him a saint, a great teacher of the faith and one of only three Christians granted the title ‘the theologian’, Gregory didn’t actually want to be ordained. Many of us who find ourselves called by God to ministry follow Jonah in running away, sometimes for years, before reluctantly giving in and doing what God wants. Gregory went further and ran away after! No sooner had he been ordained on Christmas Day 361 than he fled to seclusion and a quiet place to pray, rebelling against the terrible ‘act of tyranny’ he felt had been forced upon him by his father, the

ordaining bishop who made him priest to the loud acclaim of the congregation in the church on his family estates. It's not exactly a modern selection process.

When Gregory eventually returned, some months later, at Easter, he offered them a meditation on why he ran away. In doing so he set down some of the most profound theology of priesthood in the early church – a pastoral vision of a holy task that demanded discipline and personal holiness lest priests be 'poor painters of the charms of virtue' (Or. 2.13). Yet how could anyone live up to this when goodness struggles to take hold of human nature, like fire on green wood; yet the spark of evil burns through us like dry stubble at the end of the harvest? (Or. 2.12)

Only through the grace of the incarnation and the acts wrought in Christ could there be a healing of our weakness, a restoration of the old Adam to the place whence he fell and a return to the tree of life (Or. 2.26). To dare to minister, to dare to speak and preach, a priest must find balance of passions, balance of doctrines, neither blurring the persons of the Godhead together, nor separating the Trinity into three gods. And this self-understanding must be balanced by a deep understanding of those one ministers to – for this journey into holiness is relational and demands an itinerary individually tailored to the person, rather than some universal advice or steps. After the example of St Paul, Gregory thought the priest shares in the joys and sorrows of the congregation – 'Did anyone stumble', Gregory says, Paul was also weak; did another suffer scandal, Paul was on fire' (Or. 2.53).

As we heard in our reading, Paul charged the church in Rome, 'Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep' (Rom. 12.15). Gregory set that ideal at the heart of priesthood but he recognized that it needs to go deep. It's not just an attitude one can adopt or pretend but must come from a profound sense of who we truly are before God and an honest sense of our journey into his truth.

'Fleeing' was then not just an act of fear but also one of humility and learning. Other desert fathers and mothers often took up this theme. Abba Arsenius heard the voice of God bidding him, 'Flee from human company and you will be saved' and countless voices in the tradition would try to unpack what this meant not as an absence but rather a radical form of presence. The ascetic's cell became everything, a place of prayer, life and spiritual training. 'Sit in your cell,' Abba Moses said, 'and your cell will teach you everything'. For that is what asceticism (Gk, askesis) means – not denial but training and education.

Whereas we might see this sort of spirituality as the complete opposite of Paul's command to 'live in harmony with one another' (Rom. 12:16) and not cut ourselves off from anyone; the desert mothers in particular saw spiritual flight not just as a running away but a journeying towards.

Famously Serapion of Egypt travelled once on a pilgrimage to Rome. There he was told of a celebrated recluse, a woman who lived always in one small room, never going out. However, he could not understand how she might come close to God always staying in one place, apparently refusing to embark on the journey of faith which impelled him restlessly around the Mediterranean. So he called on her and asked: “Why are you sitting here?” To this she replied: “I am not sitting. I am on a journey.”

I hope that the new curates won't immediately run away from their task like Gregory. But I pray that they and we will draw on these past few months of lockdown to find inspiration to 'rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer' (Rom. 12:12). The experience of being cut off from much of the world, except for screens, phones and radio, has not been something chosen as an ascetic calling. Its lessons have often been more of constraint and necessity but there is much to be learned from lockdown nonetheless. As life moves towards a new normal, albeit a disrupted one, where nothing is as we expected, social distances are maintained and many of us still need to shield, we should hold onto some of the new ways of presence, the new insights of neighbourliness and connection and, above all, the hope that can answer fear.

'Let love be genuine', Paul says. 'Hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good' (Rom. 12:1). There in our Scripture we say that same paradox – flight and attraction, journey from and to. May our staying enrich our going, our gathering shape our sending. In the commissioning service last week, we prayed the words of the hymn, May the Mind of Christ my Saviour. Asking for contemplation, courage and compassion. Praying that the new curates may be Christ-like and share that Christ-likeness with us. May those same words bless us now.

*May the mind of Christ, my Saviour,
live in me from day to day,
by his love and pow'r controlling
all I do and say.*

*May the Word of God dwell richly
in my heart from hour to hour,
so that all may see I triumph
only through his pow'r.*

*May the peace of God my Father
rule my life in ev'rything,*

*that I may be calm to comfort
sick and sorrowing.*

*May the love of Jesus fill me
as the waters fill the sea;
him exalting, self abasing:
this is victory.*

*May I run the race before me,
strong and brave to face the foe,
looking only unto Jesus
as I onward go.*

*May his beauty rest upon me
as I seek the lost to win,
and may they forget the channel,
seeing only him.*

Kate Wilkinson (1925)

Romans 12:9–21

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' No, 'if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.