A CHRISTIAN ODYSSEY
W. H. Auden’s “Atlantis”

Trinity 13
Texts: Ecclesiasticus 3.17-29, Revelation 1

I take as my main text this morning a poem by W. H. Auden—although I will touch on our second reading from the Revelation of St John as I draw to a close.

Auden, as many of you will know, is certainly one of the greatest poets writing in English in the 20th century, and probably one of the greatest ever. He was an undergraduate here at Christ Church in the 1920s, and resided here twice more, once as the University’s Professor of Poetry in the late 1950s and again shortly before his death in 1973.

After a brief adolescent spell of religious enthusiasm, Auden’s Christian faith had faded. But in 1940 he returned to the Anglican communion and in 1941, at a time of emotional crisis following the loss of his lover and death of his mother, his faith intensified. During his adult sojourns in Christ Church, he was a regular worshipper in this cathedral, as the plaque in the floor of the Chapel of Remembrance records.

The poem that I’ve chosen to reflect on this evening was written in 1941, the year that Auden’s faith revived. It’s called “Atlantis”, and in it one friend bids farewell to another, who is about to embark on an odyssey to Plato’s mythical isle. It is clear enough, however, that Auden is using this classical form to describe the Christian life, and that his Atlantis is the promised land of eternal life—the Isle of the Blest.

I’ll read the poem first, and then comment on it.
Being set on the idea  
Of getting to Atlantis,  
You have discovered of course  
Only the Ship of Fools is  
Making the voyage this year,  
As gales of abnormal force  
Are predicted, and that you  
Must therefore be ready to  
Behave absurdly enough  
To pass for one of The Boys,  
At least appearing to love  
Hard liquor, horseplay and noise.

Should storms, as may well happen,  
Drive you to anchor a week  
In some old harbour-city  
Of Ionia, then speak  
With her witty scholars, men  
Who have proved there cannot be  
Such a place as Atlantis:  
Learn their logic, but notice  
How its subtlety betrays  
Their enormous simple grief;  
Thus they shall teach you the ways  
To doubt that you may believe.
If, later, you run aground
Among the headlands of Thrace,
Where with torches all night long
A naked barbaric race
Leaps frenziedly to the sound
Of conch and dissonant gong:
On that stony savage shore
Strip off your clothes and dance, for
Unless you are capable
Of forgetting completely
About Atlantis, you will
Never finish your journey.

Again, should you come to gay
Carthage or Corinth, take part
In their endless gaiety;
And if in some bar a tart,
As she strokes your hair, should say
"This is Atlantis, dearie,"
Listen with attentiveness
To her life-story: unless
You become acquainted now
With each refuge that tries to
Counterfeit Atlantis, how
Will you recognise the true?
Assuming you beach at last
Near Atlantis, and begin
That terrible trek inland
Through squalid woods and frozen
Thundras where all are soon lost;
If, forsaken then, you stand,
Dismissal everywhere,
Stone and now, silence and air,
O remember the great dead
And honour the fate you are,
Travelling and tormented,
Dialectic and bizarre.

Stagger onward rejoicing;
And even then if, perhaps
Having actually got
To the last col, you collapse
With all Atlantis shining
Below you yet you cannot
Descend, you should still be proud
Even to have been allowed
Just to peep at Atlantis
In a poetic vision:
Give thanks and lie down in peace,
Having seen your salvation.
All the little household gods
Have started crying, but say
Good-bye now, and put to sea.
Farewell, my dear, farewell: may
Hermes, master of the roads,
And the four dwarf Kabiri,
Protect and serve you always;
And may the Ancient of Days
Provide for all you must do
His invisible guidance,
Lifting up, dear, upon you
The light of His countenance.
Here are my reflections on three passages. First:

*Being set on the idea*  
*Of getting to Atlantis,*  
*You have discovered of course*  
*Only the Ship of Fools is*  
*Making the voyage this year,*  
*As gales of abnormal force*  
*Are predicted*

The journey to Atlantis or the Promised Land or heaven or God is made by a Ship of Fools, not by a Ship of Saints. What makes a fool here, the text immediately implies, is someone who goes to sea, knowing that gales are brewing—knowing that the journey is going to be difficult and fraught.

But in Auden’s view, there’s more to a fool than that. The spiritual odyssey to the Isle of the Blest is made by those who struggle to keep themselves together; whose lives are unsettled by contradiction; who find themselves tossed about by anxieties and desires they barely understand, far less control. It’s made by those who are not masters of themselves, whose lives are *not* sorted—and who know it only too well.
Indeed, the odyssey can only be made by those who have learned to accept their own troubled fatedness. Not at all in the sense of being happy or content with it. Not in the sense of settling for it. Rather in the sense of working patiently with the awkward material that has been given us, humbly trusting that our little works of improvement might one day be met with God’s gift of perfect wholeness. As Auden wrote in an earlier poem, 
*You shall love your crooked neighbour/ With your crooked heart.*

The spiritual journey lies tediously *through* our own peculiar crookedness, not neatly around it. Thus in the fifth stanza of ‘Atlantis’:

... *honour the fate you are,
Travelling and tormented,
Dialectic and bizarre.*

“Honour the fate you are”: hear the compassion for the human condition and its intractabilities. But no complacency here: for this fate involves “travelling”.
The second passage for reflection is this:

Should storms, as may well happen,
Drive you to anchor a week
In some old harbour-city
Of Ionia, then speak
With her witty scholars, men
Who have proved there cannot be
Such a place as Atlantis:
Learn their logic, but notice
How its subtlety betrays
Their enormous simple grief;
Thus they shall teach you the ways
To doubt that you may believe.

When I first read this I assumed that Auden was referring to the dons of Christ Church. But since it was written before he returned as Professor of Poetry in 1956, that is not so likely. Clearly it does refer to academic skeptics or, more exactly, to academic atheists—“witty scholars ... who have proved there cannot be such a place as Atlantis”.
What Auden says here is enigmatic:

*Learn their logic, but notice*
*How its subtlety betrays*
*Their enormous simple grief;*
*Thus they shall teach you the ways*
*To doubt that you may believe.*

What’s suggested is that the atheist’s logic, especially its subtlety, is an expression of deep grief, and that it tacitly affirms what it explicitly denies—for through this doubting we learn to believe. I’m intrigued by this, and I think he’s on to something here, though I’m not sure that I fully understand it.

Atheism as a form of grief. It’s obvious enough that, whatever some philosophers pretend, human reasoning and argumentation are seldom pure and disinterested. Usually they involve emotions, anxieties, and desires—although these are often repressed and hidden. Sometimes, then, an atheist’s argument is the expression not merely of rational belief, but of anxious or desirous will. Sometimes it has the quality of fending off an unwelcome presence, rather than just announcing an indifferent absence. Thus its worked-up doubt ends up tacitly affirming what it purports to deny. Ironically, by this way of doubting we are led to believe.
But that would amount to atheism as a form of resentment. What about atheism as a form of grief? Well, maybe some atheism expresses, not resentment that God exists, but disappointment that he doesn’t. If so, then the phenomenon of atheistic disappointment begs a question: Why do human beings suffer this disappointment? To be disappointed, one must first expect. But why do human beings expect God in the first place? Why, when afflicted by some great evil, are we inclined to shake our fists at heaven and complain about the lack of justice? Why did we ever suppose that there was such a thing, or that there is a God who could deliver it?

Maybe, of course, the world is just perverse. Maybe our natural assumption of God and of ultimate justice is just an accidental absurdity.

Maybe. But we do tend to resist settling for ultimate absurdity. We tend to assume that the world is rational, and that there are reasons for things. We expect questions to meet with satisfying answers.

So the fact that an atheist doesn’t merely doubt that God exists, but is disappointed that he doesn’t—the fact that an atheist doesn’t merely doubt, but grieves—raises the question, Whence the original expectation, the original yearning?

One answer is that it’s just a cosmic tease. But if this doesn’t satisfy, then maybe the ground of the yearning lies in its fulfillment. Maybe we yearn just because there is the possibility of fulfillment, and because we half-perceive it.

Thus the atheist’s grieving, disappointed doubt bears inadvertent witness to faith and its ground.
Now comes the third and final passage:

Stagger onward rejoicing;
And even then if, perhaps
Having actually got
To the last col, you collapse
With all Atlantis shining
Below you yet you cannot
Descend, you should still be proud
Even to have been allowed
Just to peep at Atlantis
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Give thanks and lie down in peace,
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All the little household gods
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And may the Ancient of Days
Provide for all you must do
His invisible guidance,
Lifting up, dear, upon you
The light of His countenance.
The biblical allusions are most obvious here: to Moses’ seeing the Promised Land while being unable to enter it; to Simeon’s *Nunc Dimittis*; to the Ancient of Days; and to the popular blessing from the Book of Numbers.

Auden’s poem concludes with a prospect of fulfilment. The pilgrim, guided by God, reaches his destination—or at least sees enough of it to lie down in peace.

It’s a very satisfying end, giving meaning to all the struggle and hardship—all the staggering and collapsing—that went before. In this it mirrors a basic, narrative feature of the biblical and Christian vision of human life. That it doesn’t just go ‘round and ‘round in futile circles. That it isn’t just a case of one damn thing after another. That it is a journey from a place of restlessness to a place of rest, running all the way from the Fall in the third chapter of the Book of Genesis, through the crucifixion and the resurrection in the Gospels, to the glorious, shining Ascension that we heard of this morning in our second reading from the Book of Revelation.
This biblical, Christian vision of human life may raise all manner of difficult question (and it does). But it is undoubtedly a beautiful vision that graces human lives with purpose and significance.

That doesn’t prove anything. But faced with choosing between, on the one hand, a beautiful vision that lifts up human hearts and lights up human faces,
and on the other, an enormous grief that weighs them down with grey despair,
there’s reason to wager on the beauty.

As did Auden.

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