

Reflection for Sunday 19th July 2020

Sometime in the third century of the Christian era --- or perhaps even earlier than that, there emerged into Christian liturgy that which is known as the *Sursum Corda* --- an invitation by the priest to the people to lift up their hearts to God. It remains an important part of the Communion Liturgy today --- most often, of course, celebrated in the vernacular language of the setting rather than in Latin.

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Lift up your hearts.

We lift them to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give thanks and praise.

The idea and the image conjured by the *Sursum Corda* is --- to me --- so much more powerful and inspiring than the rather prosaic – *Let us Worship God*.

Sometime in the 20th century an American, named Alfred Morton Smith set down a hymn tune which carries echoes of the plainsong chants which have been part of the worship life of the Church for many centuries. Alfred Smith named the tune *Sursum Corda* and it found, to my mind, the perfect partner in the lyrical setting of Psalm 139 by the Scottish minister, Ian Pitt-Watson.

You are before me, God, you are behind

And over me you have spread out your hand.

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,

Too high to grasp, too great to understand.

It is a peerless gift for leading one into a time of worship and devotion. Psalm 139, of course, affirms the universal presence of God; neither geography nor the darkness of night --- nor indeed even death itself --- can, in the faith and experience of the Psalmist --- provide an escape from God --- and the Psalmist celebrates that truth with wonder and great humility.

For most of us --- instinctively --- the idea that there is nowhere to hide is – at the very least --- uncomfortable. A life lived under constant scrutiny would mean no opportunity to relax --- and the stress and strain of that would be unbearable --- even for the best and strongest of us. For many people --- and I include myself among them ---- there are times when we just want – no – need – to be alone. For many of us --- and I include myself among them --- there are periods when the threat of not being able to be alone --- becomes quite overwhelming --- even terrifying. At times of great fragility --- at times when emotional or mental health is not as good as it might be ---- just walking along the street to post a letter--- becomes a bridge too far --- the prospect of meeting someone and having to engage in conversation --- just impossible to contemplate.

Certain parts of the desire or the need to be alone are perfectly rational and understandable – yet when that becomes extreme --- then rationality tends to be overcome by panic and dread which far exceed the bounds of common sense. In that very dark place, many people find that they need to escape even from themselves --- from their conscious awareness of being themselves --- which --- again --- can become an unhealthy extension of the perfectly healthy need we all share --- for escapism --- be it in music – art – literature --- or exercise. Over the years, as a result of my own experiences and of hearing those of others --- I have reflected a great deal on all of this --- and I still do.

Thus far – it seems to me ---- and there is nothing uniquely profound about this ---- that the discomfort of scrutiny ---- whether it be by others --- or indeed by our conscious selves ---- lies in the prospect --- or the likelihood of judgement. We fear being found out --- that the positive or reasonably positive image others have of us --- might be destroyed --- if only they see the true us --- discover what we are actually like. And the lower our self-esteem – our sense of self-worth --- then the more we are likely to project that low judgement onto others. Most of us do it --- and some of us to our serious detriment.

We have jumped both forward and back this week in the narrative of Jacob, having last week noted his struggles with Esau – his fleeing from Esau – his struggles then with Laban --- his flight from Laban --- and fundamentally – his struggles with God. We are back today at that time when Jacob is on the run from his brother, Esau. Lying down to rest after the rigours of the day's journey and the emotional stress of leaving his family behind – Jacob dreams. In the morning he exclaims:

“Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!” ‘How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.’

It will take some time for Jacob to realise that God is in every place --- at all times --- whether we know it or not --- a truth which – much later --- the Psalmist understood very well.

It is, I think, one of the great tragedies of our Christian history --- that the ubiquity of God has been conjoined to a particular misunderstanding of God ---- to create --- or certainly to feed and build up -- - that capacity – or tendency – which we all have --- for critical self judgement.

It is often said that we tend to be our own most severe critics --- and wherever that tendency originates --- it is certainly given fuel and encouragement by the idea that God is judging us for our sins – that God sees us as we are – and what we are is deserving of only one thing --- the wrath and the judgement of God. In the Calvinist tradition within which I grew, [though not just there] this theology has laid

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down a dark and miserable history which is about as far as it is possible to get from the life giving and life fulfilling grace of God.

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Thankfully --- the Psalmist of old seems to have had no such hang-ups. The Psalmist wants God to search out any wickedness within him; wants to be made new by the refining fires of grace --- but that -- it seems -- is not a prospect which terrifies him --- but one that he welcomes. The answer to that lies surely in his own experience of God; in his knowledge that God is perfect grace. In other words --- experience has taught the psalmist that God is not this projection of our flawed humanity which manifests itself in ideas of a an angry, judgmental and jealous God -- --- rather the Psalmist has discovered that God loves him as he is -- full stop --- no qualifications.

Or to use the words of Philip Yancey in his lovely book *“What’s so amazing about grace.”*

“Grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us more... And grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us less... Grace means that God already loves us as much as an infinite God can possibly love.”

The true judgement of God lies in God’s patient and relentlessly loving desire to help us to see and to achieve that which we can become -- the fulness of our potential --- which is a potential way beyond anything we ourselves can imagine or conceive. It is when that truth dawns upon us that we can truly -- lift up our hearts to God and with the Psalmist --- affirm to God’s praise:

You are before me, God, you are behind

And over me you have spread out your hand.

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,

Too high to grasp, too great to understand.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen