

Sunday 14 January 2024, Epiphany II, Choral Matins

Ephesians 2. 1-10

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Do you remember that thing we saw, my love,
One beautiful sweet summer morning
Where the path turned: a rotting carcass
Lay on a bed of gravel.

The writers of scripture use many different images when speaking of our relationship with God. In 1 John we are 'sons of God.' In Jeremiah and in 2 Corinthians we are 'clay vessels' formed by his hands. At the end of our second lesson from the epistle to the Ephesians we are 'God's workmanship.' These conditions are a result of God's interaction with us, His intervention in our lives. We are made sons, or children, of God by the bestowal of God's love. We are clay vessels shaped for use by God for particular circumstances. We are God's workmanship — one might even read it as 'God's masterpieces' — formed for good works.

These are pleasant images and they make us feel affirmed. We like to hear that God is pleased with us. It can be tempting to hear these pleasant things the scriptures say without taking into consideration the less pleasant things which are also said of us in those same scriptures. In the case of this passage from Ephesians, which ends with us being God's masterpieces, begins with the image of a corpse. 'A rotting carcass lay on a bed of gravel.' I quote here from Baudelaire who, I think, captured in his work the complex relationship between the beautiful and the grotesque that is integral to the way in which the New Testament writers conceive of humanity.

To St Paul, as to St John for that matter, there are two sides to humanity: humanity as we are by nature, and humanity as we are after God's intervention. *And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins*, Paul writes. You who were dead: that is the natural condition of us all, dead men walking. The word used is *nekrous*, from which we derive such words as necrotic and necropolis. The whole world without God's intervention is a city of the dead. *You were dead in trespasses and sins; Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience.*

'Trespasses and sins' is a condition, in the thought of St Paul, not merely a series of acts. Sin is something in which we live, a miasma through which we stumble; and it blinds us and chills our spirit and dampens our ears to the message of good news. *But God*, he continues. (So rich a phrase though so small). *But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ.* Look! Into the dark, a burst of light, a divine intervention. *For, behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people: but the Lord shall arise upon thee, and his glory shall be seen upon thee.* The Epiphany which we continue to celebrate is the appearing of the light of God which pierces and dispels the gloom of sin.

This piercing light brings not only warmth and sight and clarity, but life itself. For the light is life himself, Jesus Christ. You were not alive as you stumbled in the darkness of sin, subject to the kingship of the devil and his monstrous reign, says Paul. You were in fact the dead imagining you were alive, a corpse playing at breathing. But God has intervened. But God *hath raised us up together [with Christ], and made us sit together in heavenly places.*

Let me draw you back to Baudelaire for a moment. Part of the effectiveness of his poetry is in the contrast drawn between light and dark, grotesque and shapely, ugly and beautiful. And I certainly feel we recognise and appreciate the beautiful so much more when we have seen and understood the truly hideous. For me, there is a visceral reaction when I view in my imagination the images he describes. It is the same response Paul intends his readers to have when he writes of our being dead in trespasses and sins. Before the light of faith in Jesus Christ you were a rotting carcass, mouldering in the gloom of a world dominated by sin. You may not have felt it, you may not have experienced it as such, but it is the truth of humanity apart from God: a parody of life played out by a jangling, necrous body. It should not be difficult to believe this: what we see around us every day testifies to the truth: war, famine caused by greed, sexual abuse, hate speech, the holding of grudges, quarrelling, malicious gossip, pride.

And even in areas of our lives who have received the light of Christ there is a memory of that deadly life. We are not yet perfect. But- another truth- God *hath quickened us together with Christ.* He has made us alive with Christ. We already possess the resurrection to true life in the knowledge of God and in the love of Jesus. It is a supernatural work performed by his power, and it is as real as the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead; a body that was dead now lives. You were really and truly dead, St Paul proclaims, but now you are really and truly alive because you have believed the message of Jesus.

The living body in Jesus Christ is a beautiful thing. No longer are we corpses parodying life, but we are truly vigorous bodies imbued with all the potential for goodness inherent in the knowledge of God and the desire to please him. From these living bodies spring all kinds of lovelinesses: peacemaking, food for the hungry, generosity, chaste actions, words of kindness, forgiveness, edifying conversation, honesty, humility. Could there be a greater contrast with the death of sin than the life of redemption?

When we are honest about where we were when God found us, we are better prepared to express our gratitude in worship and gracious work. God's intervention, his reaching down to us in Christ, is a transformative act that comes from the abundance of his love, *That in the ages to come he might shew the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus.* God has intervened to bring us to true life, not because he had to, or because we deserved it, but because he is rich in kindness. Gratuitous grace which restores the dead to life is the good news that Jesus brings. As we proceed into this new year, let us pray that God will grant us grace to live the true life of God and continually renew and refresh in us the resurrection life of Christ his Son, Our Lord. Amen.