

A Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after Easter,

commonly called *Rogation Sunday*; 17th May 2020 at Saint John's Church in Savannah

I came forth from the Father, and am come into the world: again, I leave the world, and go to the Father"
(John 16.28).

In the simplest of language, these words of Jesus at the last supper bespeak the completeness of his mission on earth, as Mediator of God and men, reconciling the world to the Father, and the Father to the world. *I came forth from the Father, and am come into the world:* there is his Incarnation, his taking on himself of our humanity, in the realm of our rebellion against God. *Again, I leave the world, and go to the Father* – and there, from the heart of the world, from its alienation from God, there is the completeness of his return to the Father in perfect obedience unto death, a return manifested first in the resurrection, and then in the ascension, in manhood rescued from ruin, and taken up into the very life of God himself. All this for us, and in our place: as both priest and victim, the Mediator has made a “full perfect and sufficient sacrifice oblation, and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world” – so that nothing now stands between us and God

This completeness of Christ's return is what Jesus speaks of when he said *it is finished* (John 19:30 - a cry not of defeat but of victory, of mission accomplished. As the prophet Isaiah says – God's Word has gone forth, and it does not return him void, it accomplishes that which he pleases, and prospers in the things whereto God sent it. Because the work of atonement for our sins has been finished and perfected, nothing prevents us from returning entirely to God in repentance and faith - quite apart from our works whether bad or good – as those who are forgiven, justified, adopted into sonship, and on track for glory. On this Rogation Sunday we celebrate the completeness of our redemption: "the strife is o'er, the battle done, the victory of life is won; the song of triumph has begun, alleluia!"¹

Today's lessons speak to the implications of his finished work for our wills, as they are moved by delight or by duty, in desiring doing. Because of Christ's finished work as Mediator, we have full access to the Father the prayer, and the fulfilment of all our desire and will, when we come to him in his name of Son: *whatsoever ye ask the Father in my name, he will give it you. Hitherto have ye asked nothing in my name: ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full.* What an amazing promise! That word *whatsoever* – so without qualification! - speaks to the entire content of our wills – including much that is no doubt merely selfish or petty or short-sighted. So how can this be? How can Christ make so unqualified a promise? At the heart of all human willing, even that which is selfish and petty and short-sighted, is the desire of inexhaustible happiness in the possession of an infinite good – a happiness that can only be satisfied in God himself. It is what is moving in every desire every human being as ever had, no matter how petty, trite, or selfish, however blind we may be the full implications or reality of what we long for. But when we ask the Father in the name of Jesus – in the faith of Jesus as Mediator, as those reconciled through his blood – we can't make that ask without considering who we are asking this from, and in whose name we are asking it – which is to say, that in asking we bring forth the content of our wills before God, and we begin to see *whatsoever* is in our will in relation to Christ's finished work, his accomplishment of the Father's will for our reconciliation with him. We begin to see where our will truly lies in relation to the Father's great will for our eternal happiness.

Two things happen. We begin to see what we really want, and what was just a delusion. This is not the abolition or emptying of our wills, but their redemption from futility, of wanting things that are unreal. It is the redemption of our will from futility, precisely because it is reconciled with God's will, integrated with God's will, and we have become willing instruments of his eternal purpose, the means by which his good and perfect will for our happiness is done in us. So in the asking of prayer, there is both the purification of desire, and its full and complete satisfaction in eternal beatitude, in the enjoyment of infinite bliss.

And if you see that prayer is the fulfilment of our wills in the Father's will – then you will recognize the close connection of the gospel's teaching with what St. James is speaking of in today's epistle - which is how the Father's will finds fulfilment in our wills – *as doers, and not merely hearers, of the word*. Doing the word we may think is just a matter of trying harder – of turning up the will power, but it is not. Because the will is like a rubber band that has been stretched – and when the energy to stretch it is gone, the rubber band snaps back with a painful thwack, and you say ouch. Merely trying harder does not work. James has a different approach- which begins not with the will but with the understanding and memory: *if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass [that is, a mirror]: for he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was. But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed*. In what James calls *the perfect law of liberty* – the changeless good will of God for our salvation perfected and completed for us by Christ - is a mirror of the soul. It shows us not only what we are to do (the law) - but also crucially what we are – and it is in knowing what we are, and remembering what we are, that our wills are reformed and empowered to do what his word commands.

Thus in word of God we learn that we are moral failures, much worse than we like to believe – so that merely trying harder to be good will get us nowhere. But at the same time we learn that we are more loved than we dare think possible - sinners fully restored to Father's favor by the finished work of Christ. The problem, James says, is how quickly we forget what the mirror of the word shows us - we forget that we are sinners justified by Christ - and so we turn back quickly to old ways of thinking and old ways of acting. If you forget that you are moral failure whom God has loved and accepted, then you will not be able to take criticism from others, and you will be sharp in finding fault with others. But James tells us - *If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain*, it's empty and meaningless. Likewise if you don't remember the richness of God's love, and all that he has given for you, how God has become a Father to you for Christ's sake - then you will be stingy with your own love, and all too ready to serve the gods of this world, of success, and greed. But James says *Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widow in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world*.

And so we end where we began, in the work of the Mediator, bridging the infinite distance that separates the Father from the world, so that we are returned to the Father by faith in him, and now also by our works. In that return our wills are reconciled with the Father's will, and the Father's will with our wills, so that our heart's desire is found in his will, and his heart's desire is fulfilled in our willing. So that desiring is fulfilled in doing, and duty is taken up into delight. It's a thought taken up in the Collect for this day: *By his holy inspiration may we think those things that are good – that is by prayer – and by his merciful guiding may we perform the same, through Christ our Lord. Amen*.

The First Lesson: Isaiah 55:6 - 13

The word that accomplishes God's reconciling will.

⁶ Seek ye the LORD while he may be found,
call ye upon him while he is near:

⁷ Let the wicked forsake his way,
and the unrighteous man his thoughts:
and let him return unto the LORD, and he will have mercy upon him;
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

⁸ For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD.

⁹ For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways,
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

¹⁰ For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven,
and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth,
and maketh it bring forth and bud,
that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater:

¹¹ So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth:
it shall not return unto me void,
but it shall accomplish that which I please,
and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it.

St James 1:22-27

²² But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves. ²³ For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass: ²⁴ For he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was. ²⁵ But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed. ²⁶ If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain. ²⁷ Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.

St. John 16:23-30 (31-33)

Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it you. ²⁴ Hitherto have ye asked nothing in my name: ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full. ²⁵ These things have I spoken unto you in proverbs: but the time cometh, when I shall no more speak unto you in proverbs, but I shall shew you plainly of the Father. ²⁶ At that day ye shall ask in my name: and I say not unto you, that I will pray the Father for you: ²⁷ For the Father himself loveth you, because ye have loved me, and have believed that I came out from God. ²⁸ I came forth from the Father, and am come into the world: again, I leave the world, and go to the Father. ²⁹ His disciples said unto him, Lo, now speakest thou plainly, and speakest no proverb. ³⁰ Now are we sure that thou knowest all things, and needest not that any man should ask thee: by this we believe that thou camest forth from God.

³¹ Jesus answered them, Do ye now believe? ³² Behold, the hour cometh, yea, is now come, that ye shall be scattered, every man to his own, and shall leave me alone: and yet I am not alone, because the Father is with me. ³³ These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.

PRAYER

Prayer the Churches banquet, Angels age,
Gods breath in man returning to his birth,
The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,
The Christian plummet sounding heav'n and earth;

Engine against th' Almighty, sinner's towre,
Reversèd thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear,
The six daies world-transposing in an houre,
A kinde of tune, which all things heare and fear;

Softnesse, and peace, and joy, and love, and blisse,
Exalted Manna, gladnesse of the best,
Heaven in ordinarie, man well drest,
The milkie way, the bird of Paradise,

Church-bels beyond the stars heard, the souls bloud,
The land of spices, something understood.

George Herbert

¹ The Introit Antiphon is based on Isaiah 48:20: *with a voice of singing declare ye, tell this, utter it even to the end of the earth; say ye, The LORD hath redeemed his servant Jacob.*