

Trailing Clouds of Glory: Recovering Our Inner Sight
Hebrews 1:1-3
March 8, 2020

On this second Sunday in Lent the readings today remind us how inter-related is the world of the spiritual and the physical. Jesus takes three of his closest disciples up a hillside and there something quite amazing happens. The man, Jesus of Nazareth, is transformed into his spiritual reality: *and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white*. Simultaneously there appeared two of the patriarchs representing the law and prophets of Israel's history: Moses and Elijah. What this tells me is that the world of the spiritual and the physical are closer than we can imagine.

Each of us has grown up in a world that makes certain fundamental assumptions about life. Conventional wisdom at the beginning of this 21st century believes that our physical universe and all it contains is independent of God and the spiritual. Science wants us to believe that all matter is self-generating and flows from the evolutionary process. Nature, and all that has form, visible and invisible, is viewed to be independent of the God hypothesis. In short, the subatomic particles that make up the universe, including all the dark matter, is the product of the big bang.

In the history of Christian thinking much was made of the need to avoid the physical, or in Paul's language, ***the flesh***, because it was deemed a threat to our spiritual lives. This medieval notion lasted well into the 20th century and is still alive within parts of the church. Deeply influenced by the classical position of Augustine, with his dark and somber view of original sin, the church has encouraged the dichotomy between nature and the spiritual. Faith and the spiritual are often seen in opposition to nature, rather than its nursemaid.

It comes down to, as Philip Newell says in his book, **One Foot in Eden**, what glasses we happen to be wearing. Being able to see with the eyes of faith is to be able to see past the physical to the spiritual ground of all being. So, in a real sense what we are talking about today is the recovery of a particular way of seeing, or what the mystical tradition would term the inner sight of the soul. What we see, in other words, is not what we get. For behind, through, and

within all physical existence is embedded the spiritual. It is the genius of the Celtic tradition to keep this perspective alive.

This is the point Hebrews one is making. The writer says: *but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. (Col. 1:15ff)*

It was through Christ that physical existence came into being and it is through his controlling presence that the atoms of the universe continue to exist as they do. All physical existence, says our text, is kept together by virtue of Christ's spiritual presence and power. We can say therefore that the physical world we see, touch, smell and hear, can be viewed as sacramental, speaking to us of the spiritual that lies behind it. In short, behind and throughout all physical structures of the universe lies the presence of God's Spirit.

Paul says of Jesus Christ: *He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible...all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.*

A few years ago I was sent a picture of my younger brother in a pram with me standing beside him. I look for all the world the chubbiest little boy. But as I look into the eyes of that boy who do I see peering out at me today. If I am to recover my true sense of sight, as Celtic Christianity suggests, I ought to see the beauty of innocence and holiness. Can we not remember that child we were? Do you remember playing in open fields, running in the wind, imagination run riot and full of wonder? I remember well, at a very young age, lying with my little friends in the grass across from our house, looking up into the sky and seeing all sorts of things in the shapes of the clouds. Where did that child go? Where did our sense of innocence and wonder steal off to? Or is it still there buried beneath a thousand disappointments and the harsh realities of life?

There is a marvelous poem by Wordsworth that I want to read which speaks so eloquently to this question. He begins the poem:

*There was a time when meadow, grove and stream,
The earth and every common sight,
To me did seem Apparelled in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream.
It is not now as it has been of yore;-
Turn wheresoe'er I may, By night or day, The things which I have
seen I now can see no more.*

Wordsworth seems to be saying that the wonder of childhood innocence enabled us to see the magic and wonder of life. But as we grow more sophisticated that vision somehow becomes obscured. He goes on to say:

*Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting: The soul that rises with us,
our life's star, Hath had elsewhere its setting, And cometh from afar:
Not in entire forgetfulness, And not in utter nakedness, But trailing
clouds of glory do we come from God, who is our home: Heaven lies
about us in our infancy! Shades of the prison-house begin to close
Upon the growing boy...*

The bible affirms all over the place that Christ, as the medium of all physical reality, shines into the very centre of human existence. Each one of us, by virtue of those trailing clouds of glory from our original home, has received, at the very heart of who we are, God's light. God's image shines within us, however obscured by our sins, by life, by prejudice, by hurt, by rebellion.

But to see all this properly we need, as Newell claims, a recovery of our inner sight. And this is something I can't do for myself. To be able to see again requires a real transformation within me. It was to this end that Christ came into our world to redeem and transform it. To recover my true self: goodness, innocence and holiness: I need Christ's transforming grace to release me from bondage to sin. We do not become something else through conversion. Grace shapes us, though time, into who we truly are, fully human beings made in God's image.

Amen