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# The Parish Paper

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The Conversion of St. Paul (Epiphany III)

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## THE AIR WE BREATHE (II)

The second part of a sermon preached by Fr Ralston on the Collect of the day for the First Sunday after the Epiphany in 1991.

III

And so, therefore, we come to the end. Perception and knowledge are balanced in this collect with "grace" and "power". The seeing of a thing as real is grace working in us; the subsequent knowledge of what it is power. It means that the things we ought to do, once seen and recognized, will be fulfilled and faithfully realized in that form of knowing which is action.

We speak of the service of God as "perfect freedom" [2nd Collect, Morning Prayer]. The Latin phrase which this translates is more explicit: Deo servire regnare est. "To serve God is to reign" – is to be a king. Christian life is not a matter of plodding dutifully from one service job to the next. It is a way of learning little by little to see and know life with the eyes and vision of God – "as if we were God's spies" – and then, with His grace and power, to live life God's way.

And so this prayer binds our life up in God: the Father to whom all prayer is offered; the Son who is our very knowledge of God; the Spirit, whose grace and power accomplish all of it within us. Eliot says, "human-kind cannot bear very much reality". Learning to live life in God's light is not at first very easy to bear. We are blinded by its very excess, and the first things we perceive may be all the warts and the wrinkles and the cracks. Plato has a wonderful tale of people chained in a cave behind a wall, with their faces to the back of the cave, seeing only shadows; and he speaks of their being "turned around" – his precise word is "converted" – to see toward the mouth of the cave and be drawn into the sunlight.

IV

The Collect for this Sunday thus describes the very spiritual air by which and in which we live – the true atmosphere of the "godly life". The logic of it is inescapable. It is a law of our nature as living souls, and the form of our life as spiritual beings. This prayer is very splendid theology. But, as Austin Farrer writes, "Theology that does not steer towards poetry remains in port". The collect has converted theology into the purest poetry. What we are asking for in this prayer is the conversion of our minds. When we are enabled to see and perceive,

then comes the fulfilling grace and power of knowledge, to do as we should do, and be as we should be – “casting off the works of darkness and putting on the armour of light”. Then we live in imitation of God and in perfect freedom. It was Socrates’ deepest insight and most perplexing conviction that “knowledge is virtue”. I like to think of him saying the collect we have before us today, reciting this poem, if you will, in the delight of fulfilled understanding.

The real life of Christian service is not drudgery, and is beyond duty. Instead it is a process of becoming accustomed to “doing the truth”, because we perceive it as true, and go on in grace and power to know it, even as we are known and held by it.

For us it may be like the ascent of Mount Everest: no easy matter. But however hard it is to breathe that air, you are still on top of the world.

WHR

“DIE KOENIGE”

One of the most beautiful “carols” for Epiphany is Die Koenige, “The Three Kings”, a song written and composed in 1859 by the German composer Peter Cornelius (1824-1874). St. John’s choir has sung it on a number of occasions in recent years, and on the Internet you can see and hear a 2006 performance of it by the King’s College Choir, directed by Stephen Cleobury. I find the final stanza deeply affecting:

Thou child of man,

lo, to Bethlehem

The Kings are travelling,

travel with them!

The star of mercy,

the star of grace,

Shall lead thy heart

to its resting place.

Gold, incense, myrrh

thou canst not bring

Offer thy heart

to the infant King.

"Travel with them" – "offer thy heart": it is an illusion to think that we can obey these exhortations, except it be given to us to do so. Yet if it is given to us to obey these exhortations, we must not lose the opportunity. The heart hardens so readily; the protective walls are built so strongly; the gates of the soul are closed so firmly. Anxiety and fear - of the rigors of pilgrimage and the cost of offering, keep us locked up within our citadels; and it is only by God's true grace that there is any opening at all. Yet that grace may begin even in the yearning for grace that this song so movingly expresses. To us it belongs to nurture and cherish what little flame grace may light in our souls that it may grow, if God wills and as God wills, to a greater light, so that the heart may come through pilgrimage and offering "to its resting place", to its home in God. "Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee".

I wonder if these words of Peter Cornelius, which were published in 1871, inspired Christina Rossetti's familiar 1872 poem, "In the Bleak Mid-Winter": "What can I give him, Poor as I am? If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb. If I were a wise man, I would do my part. But what I can I give him, give my heart." Perhaps these words may inspire us. GGD

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a2dNKv48WJQ>

**The Rev'd William H. Ralston, Jr.**



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