

## Tenth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Today's **First Reading** takes us back to an ancient Near-Eastern myth preserved for us in the opening chapters of the Book of Genesis. In the story of Adam and Eve, the inspired author of Genesis explores the meaning of human existence. He speaks of man and woman as formed in the one creative act of God, and then wrenched apart, each incomplete without the other, each longing for the other in order to be made whole. The mythical drama portrays God as forming us out of the dust of the earth, and breathing into us his own Spirit in order that we might live.

Behind this magnificent image lies a fundamental truth. We each experience the pull of the divine, calling us into dialogue with God, opening up infinite possibilities for our mind and heart, beckoning us to freedom, responsibility and community, calling us to reach beyond where we are in response to the invitation to live in communion with God. All this and more is expressed through the image of the breath breathed into our lungs by the kiss of love given us by our creator God.

But there is more to us than that. There is another pull, towards the dust - the dust symbolised here by the serpent. This is the call of the irrational, the temptation to live without discretion, without choice, without freedom, without dialogue and without community.

There are influences in our lives which support the spirit, and there are other influences which hold us back in the dust. We are both, and we do ill to ignore the Spirit as we give in to the call from the dust, just as we do ill to forget that we are from the dust while we follow the Spirit. We are meant to be whole human beings, honouring the complex reality which is ours, but we can do this only in listening to God, to the one who shaped us with so much love and gave us a share of his life-breath, the Spirit of love.

When we fail to do this, when we give in to the demands of the flesh, when we despair of ever being in communion with God, we sin. Today's beautiful **Responsorial Psalm** is a cry from a sinner, enslaved by the downward pull of the dust, his spirit trapped in the consequences of pride, greed, lust, anger, gluttony, envy and sloth. It is a cry to God for mercy and forgiveness, because we cannot free our spirit from the slime. We are like a sea-bird trapped in an oil-slick. However hard we try we cannot fly.

A key image in the psalm is that of watching. God is watching, noting our guilt. We cannot deceive God. Reality is open to God who sees who I really am: my actions, my failure to act, my motives, my heart. At the same time the psalmist knows that the eyes of God which are upon us are eyes of compassion and forgiveness. And so the psalmist, too, is on the watch. He is like the watchman on the city wall, after a long night, waiting for the first streaks of light in the eastern sky. God cannot forgive us if we do not change; but we cannot change unless God forgives us, so we must cry for mercy while sincerely opening our hearts to the grace which alone can enable us to change, to repent, to have our wings cleansed so that they can once again take to the sky, lifted up by God's breath drawing us into love. In the **Second Reading**, Paul encourages us to look beyond the horizons of this world and to set our hearts on what is invisible, on God whose love formed us for himself.

This brings us to the **Gospel**. Here we see Jesus coming to unbind us and set us free. But he

cannot do so unless he first binds up the strong one who holds us prisoner. Adam and Eve, man and woman, refused to listen to God and to obey his call. Am I going to follow their example and be excluded from paradise? Is my spirit going to be locked in the dust, unable to commune with the divine? Or am I going to hearken to Jesus and learn, like him, to do the will of the Father?

The saints who have gone before us demonstrate that it is possible for our spirit to soar to the heights, transforming our body, our feelings, our desires till all is pure and with our whole human being we live in communion of love with God. It is possible. Do I want to dare that journey? Am I willing to go through the fire? What does Jesus need to bind up if he is to set me free? What is holding me bound? What addictions continue to betray me and lock me in my lack of freedom? What habits of sin have I acquired that continue to drive me against my deepest longings?

We will not be freed by good thoughts; not even by good desires. 'It is the one who does the will of my Father who is my mother, my sister, my brother'. It is what we **do** that matters. I was hungry. It was not enough that you felt towards me. It was not enough that you thought kindly of me. It is not enough that you would have liked to have helped me. 'I was hungry and you gave me to eat - Come, blessed of my Father'.

God knows we all need to be freed from the cosmic sludge that bind us, from the family secrets, from the bad habits that we cling to because we can't imagine being without them, to our own powerless independence, to the opinion of others, and the need to be accepted by our peers. Antoine de Saint Exupéry was a French pilot who delivered mail by plane within France and beyond in the period between the wars. He describes how one day he was flying quite when he noticed a yard of domesticated geese behaving in quite a disturbed way. He thought at first that a fox or some other predator may have got into the yard, but he was unable to see any. Then something caught his eye and he looked up across the wing of his plane to see a flock of wild geese. It was the migrating season and they were heading off to avoid the winter.

I understand that when the migrating season comes, the domesticated geese who have never flown still feel an instinct that wants to free them from the cage. We are like the domesticated geese, trapped in cages made for us by others and partly reinforced by ourselves. Jesus, the wild goose, came into our yard and tried to tell us that we were made to fly. He tried to liberate us from the sin and the habit that clings so closely.

To return to my earlier image, our wings are bound by the oil slick and of ourselves we can't seem to do anything about it. Today's readings remind us to pray, for there is one who can liberate us. He calls us to follow him and he does want to clean us, to save us and to take us with him. There is no saying that the flight will be easy. John Donne recognised his need for grace, and in the following sonnet begs God to come forcibly into his life to liberate him. He knows that God will need to bring pressure to bear upon him if he is ever to be free.

'Batter my heart, three-personed God, for you  
As yet but nock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;  
That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me and bend  
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.  
I, like an usurped town to another due,

Labour to admit you, but O, to no end.  
Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,  
but is captived and proves weak or untrue.  
Yet dearly I love you and would be loved fain,  
But am betrothed unto your enemy.  
Divorce me, untie, or break that knot again,  
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,  
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,  
Nor ever chaste except you ravish me'(Holy Sonnets v).