

IN CHRIST, St Michael's, Cornhill, Sunday July 13th 2014, Trinity IV

Some of you may be fans of the novelist Iris Murdoch. Certainly I have enjoyed many of her books. *The Bell* was the novel which really set me off. It is the novel which probably made her popular first of all. It is a typically Murdochian complex tale of dysfunctional human relationships. It is focused on an equally dysfunctional lay community and with an iconic bell lying on the bed of a lake as the totem around which the story is built.

There is one passage that always remains in my mind. Dora, the 'sort of' heroine at one point spends time in the National Gallery in London. Slowly making her way round, she finds she is taken out of herself by gazing intently on just one or two of the pictures. It is an interesting scene and picks up on one of those themes which recur again and again in Murdoch's novels and philosophical writings. It is about attention.

In the past, when visiting galleries, I'd spend too little time with too many paintings. It is almost as if it was slaking a thirst in me; almost as if I was 'using' the art for my own self-indulgence. Maybe you are not as I used to be, but more like Dora when you visit a gallery. You spend time on a few pictures.

Now, apart from being a lesson in not trying to do an entire gallery in an afternoon, it is also, as Dora shows in Murdoch's novel, an exercise in attention, staying one's mind on a particular focus. Now, why begin there? Well, if we look at the reading from Paul's letter to the Romans, he begins with a similar motif and uses what is perhaps the key phrase for understanding Paul and his theology. Paul says:

'There is no condemnation now for those in Christ Jesus.'

'In Christ' or 'en Christo' in Greek is the key phrase. Although the focus of controversy has so often been on 'justification by faith' as Paul's punchline, being 'in Christ' is more determinative still. The advent of Jesus, God appearing among us as one of us, and then his dying and rising is the key for Paul. That is, being in Christ.

In the late 1920s, Kenneth Kirk, later Bishop of Oxford, wrote a classical study which he called simply *The Vision of God*. Kirk noted not that we must all expect to have a 'vision of God'. Instead he argues that it is in Jesus that we all are given the 'vision of God'. He says 'Jesus gave us a vision of God where others could only speak of it.' In Jesus we see God; God is Christlike.

Kirk went on to say that if we pay attention to Jesus, rather as Dora stayed her glance on a few transformative pictures in the National Gallery, then it will change our consciousness. So, to use Paul's motif, if we are in Christ, with our hearts and minds stayed on him, then we shall be transformed. How? Because no longer shall we stay our hearts on ourselves – even as I was wont to do with art – instead we shall be unselfed. Our consciences become utterly changed. So attention is a key discipline of the heart, mind and soul. Iris Murdoch believed that too, albeit starting from a Platonic philosophical framework.

How, then does this play itself out? Something of an answer to that can be seen in our gospel reading It is Jesus telling the parable of the sower and then giving its interpretation.

Matthew's Jesus offers a very different insight to the Jesus we encounter in Mark, but that is for another day! Matthew's Jesus uses the parables to paint pictures which give full depth to the landscape of the Kingdom of Heaven. That landscape becomes discernible only as we fix our attention on Jesus. 'Jesus', in Kenneth Kirk's terms, offers us a vision of God where others can only speak of it.

This, of course, gives an immediate and distinct focus and impact for the gospel. For now, seen through the eyes of St Paul, Jesus is not simply a didactic teacher as he can sometimes appear in Matthew. Jesus is now the entire basis of our formation in God, as individuals and as a community. Almost without realising it we are born into a 'moral theology'; it forms our lives. But it is a moral theology not a moralising theology. Offer our complete attention to God in Jesus, and our lives are changed irrevocably. We are unselfed. We see each other and our world with an utterly transformed focus.

So being in Christ, as Paul would have it, is the foundation of all. In Jesus we see God, and being in Christ we are ourselves open to deification. We do not suddenly become God, but we offer ourselves to God so that ultimately we and all creatures shall be transformed from one degree of glory to another. That is not just a virtuous hope, or a pious vision. It is a challenge to us all – base ourselves in prayer, contemplation and the worship of God – offer God our entire attention, and we may be agents of his creative and redemptive power. What a thought at the start of this new chapter here at St Michael's.

Amen

Readings:

Isaiah. 55. 10-13

Romans. 8. 1-11

Matthew. 13. 1-9, 18-23

Isaiah 55, 10-13

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.

12 For ye shall go out with joy, and be led forth with peace: the mountains and the hills shall break forth before you into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

13 Instead of the thorn shall come up the fir tree, and instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle tree: and it shall be to the LORD for a name, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

Romans 8, 1-11

1 There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.

2 For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death.

3 For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh:

4 That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.

5 For they that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh; but they that are after the Spirit the things of the Spirit.

6 For to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace.

7 Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be.

8 So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God.

9 But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his.

10 And if Christ be in you, the body is dead because of sin; but the Spirit is life because of righteousness

. 11 But if the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, he that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwelleth in you.

Matthew, 13 1-9,

1 The same day went Jesus out of the house, and sat by the sea side.

2 And great multitudes were gathered together unto him, so that he went into a ship, and sa ; and the whole multitude stood on the shore.

3 And he spake many things unto them in parables, saying, Behold, a sower went forth to sow;

4 And when he sowed, some seeds fell by the way side, and the fowls came and devoured them up:

5 Some fell upon stony places, where they had not much earth: and forthwith they sprung up, because they had no deepness of earth:

6 And when the sun was up, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away.

7 And some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprung up, and choked them:

8 But other fell into good ground, and brought forth fruit, some an hundredfold, some sixtyfold, some thirtyfold.

9 Who hath ears to hear, let him hear.

Matthew, 13, 18-23

18 Hear ye therefore the parable of the sower.

19 When any one heareth the word of the kingdom, and understandeth it not, then cometh the wicked one, and catcheth away that which was sown in his heart. This is he which received seed by the way side.

20 But he that received the seed into stony places, the same is he that heareth the word, and anon with joy receiveth it;

21 Yet hath he not root in himself, but dureth for a while: for when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, by and by he is offended.

22 He also that received seed among the thorns is he that heareth the word; and the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful.

23 But he that received seed into the good ground is he that heareth the word, and understandeth it; which also beareth fruit , and bringeth forth, some an hundredfold , some sixty, some thirty.