

## **Caius Evensong, Lent 1, 10.2.08**

### **Luke 15.1-10**

*The World was all before them, where to choose*

*Their place of rest, and Providence their guide:*

*They hand in hand with wandering steps and slow,*

*Through EDEN took their solitary way.*

Thus ends perhaps the greatest epic poem in the English language, *Paradise Lost* by John Milton, who was born 400 years ago this year. Adam and Eve depart from the Garden of Eden in disgrace certainly but not stripped of all dignity and hope. There is a certain nobility in their bearing and Adam's previous conversation with the angel has led to a reconciliation with his destiny and a deep realisation of the lessons to be learned:

Greatly instructed I shall hence depart,

Greatly in peace of thought,...

Henceforth I learne, that to obey is best,

And love with feare the onely God, to walk

As in his presence, ever to observe

His providence, and on him sole depend,

Merciful over all his works, with good

Still overcoming evil, and by small

Accomplishing great things, by things deemd weak

Subverting worldly strong, and worldly wise

By simply meek; that suffering for Truths sake

Is fortitude to highest victorie,  
And to the faithful Death the Gate of Life;  
Taught this by his example whom I now  
Acknowledge my Redeemer ever blest.

To whom thus also th' Angel last repli'd:  
This having learnt, thou hast attaind the summe  
Of wisdom; hope no higher, though all the Starrs  
Thou knewst by name, and all th' ethereal Powers,  
All secrets of the deep, all Natures works,  
Or works of God in Heav'n, Air, Earth, or Sea,  
.... onely add  
Deeds to thy knowledge answerable, add Faith,  
Add Vertue, Patience, Temperance, add Love,  
.... then wilt thou not be loath  
To leave this Paradise, but shalt possess  
A Paradise within thee, happier farr.

In other words, Adam does not leave Paradise behind, but carries it with him, within him – and indeed to discover that Paradise is a happier state than originally to be in it.

Milton owes his insights not just to Christian orthodoxy, which he was seeking to commend, but to Platonism, which at significant moments of Christian history has been faith and theology's philosophical bedfellow. Plato goes in and out of fashion and in the past few weeks his

philosophy and its supposed malign influence has come under sustained attack in the Church Times column of the Putney vicar cum Oxford philosopher, Giles Fraser.

My defence of Plato is that he has given some of history's great thinkers the confidence to believe that the ultimately important and the greatest reality lies beyond human argument and reasoning. Milton was a genius and a polymath; he knew everything and Keats was later to think that he had almost said everything that was worth saying; there was nothing left for the poet or preacher to say. Yet the great human lesson – and this Adam has learnt – is that love for and obedience to God is the sum of wisdom to which a knowledge of 'all the secrets of the deep and all nature's work' could add nothing.

Keats himself chose a career as a surgeon, but a rift developed in his mind between the scientific method and rational discourse that his work demanded of him and the reality he was seeking to explore through his poems; one seemed increasingly dry, empty and constricting, while the other seemed to lead him to life, vitality, colour and emotional fulfilment.

'Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all  
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.'

That is a Platonist's creed, not a Christian one. Keats rejected Christianity early on, but he only lived until he was 25 and his thoughts were certainly returning to the things of faith.

It reminds me of Augustine who had to become a Platonist before he became a Christian; Plato was his John the Baptist who led him to Christ.

*Late have I loved you, O Beauty ever ancient, ever new, late have I loved you! You were within me, but I was outside, and it was there that I searched for you. In my unloveliness I plunged into the lovely things which you created. You were with me, but I was not with you. Created things kept me from you; yet if they had not been in you they would have not been at all. You called, you shouted, and you broke through my deafness. You flashed, you shone, and you dispelled my blindness. You breathed your fragrance on me; I drew in breath and now I pant for you. I have tasted you, now I hunger and thirst for more. You touched me, and I burned for your peace.*

Paradise, as Milton was later to teach, was not outside but within; for Augustine, with a little help from Plato, deep in the recesses of the memory. One of Plato's observations was that discovering truth is an act of remembering; we would not recognise something to be true unless in a way we already knew it but in a shadowy, largely forgotten sort of way. So we go 'Eureka' because our discovery matches a deep intuition of what that discovery will be like.

Those who discover God – or put it in the true language of grace, those who are discovered by God – find One who somehow was there all the time and we hadn't realised it. Paradise has been lost and it needs to be found.

Our New Testament reading is about things that are lost, a sheep, a coin, and in the economy of grace it is God in the guise of the shepherd and the woman who searches until what is lost has been found. These two parables are, however, part of a triptych and are incomplete without the third; in the first two what are lost are a dumb animal and an inanimate coin. In third what is lost is a human being, a son whom we call the Prodigal, who is lost not by accident or just by being dumb but by calculated and reasoned and free choice. The coin had no choice, and the sheep was simply doing what sheep do and I don't suppose the shepherd wasted much breath berating him for it; but the son, he knew what he was doing and must bear the consequences. That's why the Father had to wait rather than chase after his son into the far country. The son had to come to his senses – coins and sheep do not. And just before he was about to take his fill from the pig's trough, it says that 'he came to himself' and he remembered home and began on his journey there. And so the third parable has a double lostness, for not only has the Father lost a son, but the son has lost his home – until he remembers it. Then the son ceases to search for fulfilment, as Augustine had, in things outside, but looked within. Home, Paradise, had been lost, but an act or remembering led to it being found again.