



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 16th July 2023

Readings: *Romans 8.1-11; Matthew 13.1-9 and 18-23*

Trinity VI

I have never been a fan of T-shirts with logos or words. I'm a plain T-shirt person really, save perhaps for a subtle black panther from Slazenger, or, if I managed to spot a bargain in the sales, the shield from Gant.

That said, I was very taken with a recent logo on a shirt from Cambridge's very-own *Talking Ts*. It says, "Home is where the Wi-Fi connects automatically." This appealed to me as one who is barely IT literate, and with a default position that *I* must be to blame for anything amiss with the internet. "Home is where the Wi-Fi connects automatically." In reality, that sounds more like heaven!

I wonder whether that might express some people's understanding of the Christian life - that discipleship is achieving a stage of faith where holy living connects automatically? And then, when the holy living doesn't connect automatically, as doubts and cross-bearing and sins get in the way, we give up, resigned to being human and therefore flawed. After all, it's so much easier.

Of course, the truth about most of us is to be found in a poem by Ella Wheeler Wilcox, who died in 1919. In *Two Kinds of People*, she observes how 'the good are half bad and the bad are half good'.¹ Now I know that is not going to get onto the next edition of Palgrave, less still was it in *Poetry 1900-1965*,² which I studied for A-level English, introducing me to W. B. Yeats and T. S. Eliot, to W. H. Auden R. S. Thomas. But, for all its Victorian sentimentality, somehow Wilcox gets human nature spot on. Is she musing upon last week's reading from Romans, where St Paul astutely summed up that life's a cocktail of the stuff we should do and the stuff we shouldn't? We heard Paul say, '... I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.'³ 7.19 I really don't think the apostle meant that we *never ever* do *anything* right or good, rather that the good we do do can become deeply scarred by the other stuff that is so flawed, letting us down and marring God's image in us. Yes, 'the good are half bad and the bad are half good'. As R. S. Thomas might have it, 'travelling towards the light//we [are] waylaid by darkness.'³

Maybe our errors are simple stuff: a fib here, some selfishness there, one greedy overindulgence too many, or an embarrassed crossing the road to avoid the person we don't want to see ... or help. It *may* be big stuff – dealing in drugs, betraying another's trust, or bigger still. But, recognising how none of us is perfect, I sometimes wonder if the sort of behaviour that *most often* mars God's image in us, is that discreet but insidious silence in the face of evil which so damages those around us. Writing years after the Holocaust, Rabbi Hugo Gryn, who lost most of his family in Auschwitz, realised that the problem with humanity's sin is not so much the obvious offences as the subtle collusion, the complacent tolerance of the intolerable. In his book, *Chasing Shadows*, Rabbi Gryn puts it like this, instead of 'holocaust', using the modern Hebrew word *Shoah*, which means catastrophe:

We tend to speak about the Shoah in terms of the victims – we know who they were – and the perpetrators – and we know who they were as well. But there was a third party to it,

¹ Wilcox, Ella Wheeler (1850-1919) from the poem, *Two kinds of people* (1896)

² MacBeth George ed 1967 *Poetry 1900-1965: an anthology selected and edited by George MacBeth* Longman and Faber and Faber

³ Thomas, R. S. (1913-2000) from the poem *Destinations* (1985)

*and increasingly I believe that all this became possible because of that third party, and they were the people we call these days 'bystanders'. ... The non-Jewish men and women who were not directly threatened or involved and who let it happen! ... No one is safe when religious or ethnic prejudice is tolerated, when racism is rife and when decent, well-meaning people keep quiet because it is prudent.' ... You could not live in that country and not know what was going on. Nobody actually came off the sidewalks and hit us, but I sensed a deep complicity with it. I really do not understand how they could not have reacted.'*⁴

That is the sort of thing that stops me in my tracks to ponder my own need of forgiveness. Visiting a concentration camp for the first time a few weeks' ago, I wondered what I would have done in 1920s Germany as such a large proportion of the Church resolved that it was best to accommodate themselves to National Socialism. And what of St Thomas's Church in Leipzig, where J. S. Bach was the eighteenth-century Cantor, or choirmaster, but two hundred years later the teenage choristers were photographed in Hitler youth uniform? How would my leadership have differed from that of the 1930s pastors of that church? In a world of so much that needs questioning and challenging, do I say enough? And the point, you see, is that by our silence that so easily implies acquiescence, thoroughly well-meaning people can get things horribly wrong. '... the good are half bad and the bad are half good'; travelling towards the light, we get waylaid by darkness.

Neither our resistance to evil, nor our embrace of virtue - our living of the holy life to which I committed myself at ordination - 'connects automatically'. The state of the world makes that entirely obvious.

In today's reading from Romans, Paul describes a starkly contrasting option for people. We have two possibilities of human existence – 'the one self-enclosed, self-regarding and hostile to God, the other open to God and to life.'⁵ It's about our mindset. Am I focussed upon the lifestyle that makes things as straightforward as possible for me and mine, or is there an altruistic way, which seeks the common good, inspired by living within God's reign? Paul's terminology speaks of a tension between the one as the way of the flesh and the other as the way of the Spirit.

To live out what someone has called the 'ethical possibility', as opposed to remaining stuck in its opposite, we need the Spirit of God, because, cut off from the Spirit we cannot live the new life that the Spirit alone enables. Indeed, Paul talks of it as liberty, telling the Romans that the Spirit – God at work amongst us here and now - sets us free for a new life. Accepting that we are all a messy non-binary mixture of things we're proud of and things we regret, St Paul's message, as much to us as to the Romans, is to let the Spirit be 'the determining force of our lives', for as Ann Philipps says in the hymn we will sing in a few minutes, 'Still, with creative power, God's Spirit comes to give a pattern of new life'.

The God who so unreservedly gave their very essence in the birth of Jesus, and whose 'cross [forever] stands empty to the sky',⁶ continues to breathe into us Christ's capacity for collusion with holiness. We can't conjure or achieve that holy living of our own volition; it is not ours for the fashioning. But we are invited to make ourselves pliable to it, because it *is* ours for the asking, and that, most fruitfully in prayer, by which we open ourselves to the

⁴ Gryn, Hugo with Naomi Gryn 2000 *Chasing Shadows: memories of a vanished world* London: Viking pp 252f

⁵ Byrne, Brendan 1996 *Romans: a commentary in the Sacra Pagina series* Collegeville, Minnesota: Michael Glazier, the Liturgical Press pp 234ff

⁶ Wren, Brian (1936-) from the hymn, *Christ is alive* (RS 260.1.2)

Spirit's presence and power. That's how we can keep travelling towards the light, and not be waylaid by darkness.

It's not easy. It's not always going to work. We *do* get waylaid. Just like seed falls on variously fertile soil, so the Spirit mingles in variously compliant hearts. And *that* is why discipleship is not a learning achievement with which we graduate in a single moment aged 21, but a lifetime's lifestyle choice, that only ends when we turn the final sharp corner of death.

Many of those who died in Auschwitz, or in Buchenwald, which I visited in March, will, at puberty, have become *bar mitzvah* or *bat mitzvah*. Recognising the claims of God's commandments, they will have assumed personal responsibility for keeping them. As we ask the work of the Holy Spirit in us, that we might keep travelling towards the light, this prayer borrows phrases from what they might have said, alongside others from what Paul said to the Romans. Before a period of silence, let us pray.

Gracious God, mindful that our capacity for walking with you does not 'connect automatically', and that each of us can be waylaid by darkness, we open ourselves afresh to the work of your Spirit. We are forever grateful that if your Spirit = as the one who raised Jesus - dwells in us, you will give life to our mortal bodies. ⁷

Rejoicing in the blessing of a faith community, and grateful for those who walk this Way with us, encouraging us to preserve this heritage of holiness and goodness, we ask your help to strengthen our loyalty and devotion to your Way, so that we may grow in charity and good deeds. ⁸ In Christ's name, we pray, Amen.

N. P. Uden
16th July 2023

⁷ cf Romans 8.11

⁸ cf Assembly of Rabbis for the Reform eds 1977 [*Forms of Prayer for Jewish Worship: Daily, Sabbath and Occasional Prayers*](#) 7th edn London: Reform Synagogues of Great Britain page 291