

LENT 2 2022
St George's Windsor

Our citizenship is in heaven. These words are taken from today's second lesson, a passage from the Letter to the Philippians. **Our citizenship is in heaven.** I hope we can have those words in mind in the course of this short sermon. **Our citizenship is in heaven.**

I want to begin, as I often do, with a poem. It is a very short poem (only eight lines long) and, at least on first reading or hearing, it seems very simple. It was composed by William Blake late in the 18th century. Its title is **Ah! Sun-flower** and it is one of Blake's **Songs of Innocence and of Experience**. I shall read only the first four lines.

“Ah Sun-flower! weary of time.
Who countest the steps of the Sun:
Seeking after that sweet golden clime
Where the travellers journey is done.”

The poem of course is not quite so simple as it seems; we are left with a number of questions. I believe, however, that we can be reasonably sure of one thing. It is that Blake sees the sunflower as an image of the human spirit. The apparent stretching out of the flower towards the sun is clearly intended by Blake to remind his readers, “weary of time” as they are, of their own inner yearning; their (as it is with the sunflower)

“Seeking after that sweet golden clime
Where the travellers journey is done.”

Quite what Blake understands “that sweet golden clime” to be is not entirely clear. Be that as it may, the image of the sunflower stretching out towards the sun works in evoking within the reader a kind of longing – for peace, for rest, for release; for a kind of heaven?

“Ah Sun-flower! weary of time.
Who countest the steps of the Sun:
Seeking after the sweet golden clime
Where travellers journey is done.”

Very often, the longing to which Blake alludes is sharpened at times of human tragedy and crisis, and mingled with both anger and melancholy. Such is the case with many of us today as we reflect on the events that have unfolded, and continue to unfold, in Europe.

The more or less ubiquitous human desire (for peace, for rest, for release; for a kind of heaven?) is seen by a host of people to lead to a dead end; the beginnings of what has been called “the daydream of the downtrodden”; the “wishful thinking” of those who are “weary of time”. After all, the sunflower, for all its “Seeking after the sweet golden clime”, remains rooted in the real earth until it dies and decays. The persistence of our longing is seen by this host of people as an indication of the futility of human existence as our dreams are, time and again, thwarted.

This view, however, will not be shared by those who call themselves ‘Christian’. To be sure, doubts are bound to cast their shadows over us. With the writer of the hymn we shall ask

“When comes the promised time
That war shall be no more,
And lust, oppression, crime,
Shall flee thy face before?”

Nonetheless, in spite of our impatience and our consequent questioning, we are possessed of a conviction that our longing is a precious gift, generated by the call of Jesus Christ and by his saints down through the ages. This is a call to see, perceive and understand (most sharply through Christ’s cross and resurrection, and through all such as have followed) that the love of God can never be defeated, however wayward and stubborn the human race might be.

Our longing (for peace, for rest, for release; for a kind of heaven?) is not some self-generated fantasy to enable us to escape, in heart and mind, from a troubled world. It is rather a Christ-generated ache for God’s Kingdom – an ache that shaped his whole person; his life and teaching, and must therefore be recognised as something essential to any true humanity.

Furthermore, by our ‘seeing’, ‘perceiving’ and ‘understanding’ that God’s love can never be defeated, we enjoy already something of that for which we long. By ‘anticipation’, we know ourselves to be, here and now, citizens of heaven. Yet, even if we are citizens of heaven, we are far away from home. We live in a strange land as colonists who must claim that land for Christ.

Someone who understood this well was Archbishop William Temple. In one of his best-known prayers, he prays to God who “through thy Son Jesus Christ hast called us to a heavenly citizenship”, to give us grace that “we may henceforth set ourselves to establish that city which has justice for its foundation and love for its law.” To be a citizen of heaven is to be a builder on earth.

But how do we build? Sometimes, we feel so small and helpless in the face of overwhelming obstacles to the establishment of “that city that has justice for its foundation and love for its law”.

It is at such times that we Christians must remember that faith as small as a mustard seed can move mountains, and that seeds do grow secretly with astonishing results. Even our tiny acts of kindness and generosity. Even little gestures of compassion and courage. Small and hidden sacrifices made for the benefit of others. Patience in adversity. A refusal to hate. And of course, fragments of prayer offered up throughout the day. These could turn out to be the building blocks of the future for which we long.

Most of all perhaps, we must simply hold on to the Christ-engendered gift of ‘longing’, (something that he has shown us to be essential to our being truly human) so as to be shaped, inspired and transformed by it, as he was. In the midst of so much turmoil and confusion, we are, as St Paul urged his Philippian readers, to “stand firm in the Lord”.

“Ah Sun-flower! weary of time.
Who countest the steps of the Sun:
Seeking after that sweet golden clime
Where the travellers journey is done.”

Citizens of heaven, home at last.