

SERMON

Profession in Solemn Vows of Br. Jonathan OSB

Feast of All Saints, 2021

Wisdom 7:7-30; Philippians 3:7-14; John 12:24-26

May the words of my mouth...

Prospective nuns and monks come to monasteries and convents for all sorts of diverse reasons, but whatever may have drawn them in the first place, there is, as a rule, only one thing that will keep them there: the love of God. The Christian life, of which the monastic life is but one expression, is at its best an ongoing and dynamic exploration of the heart of God: a response of love to love. In putting together this service, Jonny was keen to represent something of the expansive and inclusive nature of God's love; in what follows we will explore three features of this response of love to love: desire and the single way, letting go to find freedom, and dying in order that we may live.

Desire is a natural part of being human. We are creatures of desire in all sorts of ways and we saw something of this in our first reading from the Wisdom of Solomon. The writer aches with longing for Sophia, the Lady Wisdom: "I preferred her to sceptres and thrones...I loved her more than health and beauty...her radiance never ceases...she is more beautiful than the sun". This thirst for wisdom, for understanding, is one of the things I love about Jonny; he's always searching for some new knowledge and fresh insight. He recently shared with the Community his search for his dad's biological father, which required much arcane knowledge of genetics – I think I kept up with it, but I'm not sure I'd pass a test!

This desire for wisdom, though, is not pursued as an end in itself. It is clearly expansive: the writer speaks of coming to know, "the structure of the world...the cycles of the year and the constellations of the stars...the thoughts of human beings, the varieties of plants and the virtues of roots". Entwined with this expansiveness, though, is a laser-like focus: the ultimate end of all this desire and all this searching is God: "For [wisdom] is a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the Almighty...she is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God". As Rowan Williams put it in some talks given a few years ago: we allow God to lead us in the single way towards God's endless beauty.

This 'single way' can take many different forms, but the monastic framework for the Christian life is the one that Jonny has chosen – or perhaps that has chosen Jonny. It is as a symbol of this commitment that, later on in the service, Jonny will receive a gold ring. It is given as an abiding symbol of the commitment Jonny is making, something he will wear, God willing, for the rest of his life. A physical reminder of this single way which leads into God and therefore into everything that is.

This desire and this commitment to the ‘single way’ is something that we also see at work in Paul’s letter to the Philippians, where he writes, “I want to know Christ...I press on...straining forward”. An essential part of this commitment for Paul is letting go of everything that is not the ‘single way’; for Paul this meant ceasing to rely on his background and his past. Prior to his conversion he was well known and well respected as a righteous and law abiding member of the Jewish community. It is this high status that he casts off, regarding it as rubbish. Far from impoverishing him, though, this letting go brings a great freedom, freedom to “press on” to know Christ more and more fully.

It may seem strange to talk of freedom being found in such a focussed life: much of the modern world seems to tell us that freedom is about keeping your options open, having all the possibilities at your disposal.

Well, up to a point, perhaps. But part of what I think Paul is getting at here is that you can’t walk every path this life has to offer. There comes a point when, as Robert Frost beautifully puts it, the paths diverge, and you cannot remain one traveller and travel both.

Once you have chosen your path, though, there comes great freedom: freedom to explore, freedom to express yourself, freedom to know this path deeply, freedom to experience all it has to offer you and freedom to give yourself fully to it.

There is something about knowing who you are and where you’re going that is permissive, freeing, enabling. What at first may look constraining: “suffer[ing] the loss of all things” is actually an essential step into the abundance of life that Jesus offers us. Paul speaks of this purely in heavenly terms, but it’s more than just the promise for the future; the Christian life is a promise for now, if only we’ll empty our hands to receive it.

Jonny will shortly read his charter of profession, in which he will promise himself to this community in solemn vows of Stability – a positive choice for *this* road, in *this* community – Conversion of Life – an openness to how God will use his journey along this road to change him, and Obedience – at its root a commitment not so much to do as he’s told, but rather to be attentive at a deep level to what this road, this place, these people will ask of him. These vows are a deliberate placing of certain limits on his life, a choice of a path that leads, we are promised, to abundant freedom and abundant life.

And with this promise of life in our minds, we turn to today’s reading from the Gospel, where Jesus, perhaps oddly, seems to be talking more about death than life. When Jonny was preparing for his First Profession, he described it to his mum as “somewhere between a wedding and a funeral”. There’s actually a fair amount of wisdom in that description: today is a day of great gladness and rejoicing, as we join with Jonny to affirm and bear witness to his choice to follow Christ.

At the same time though Jesus talks about death as the way to fullness of life. Any choice we make for one path is a choice not to take any number of other paths, and relinquishing those can be painful. The death Jesus speaks of is real, as we put down some possibilities in order to take up Christ, the one thing necessary.

The image that Jesus uses in our gospel reading, of a grain of wheat falling into the earth and dying, is one that I as a sometime gardener find it easy to identify with. There is something amazing about burying a seed in a pot of compost and a few months later harvesting seemingly

never-ending beans, or tomatoes, or cucumbers. That seed though can do nothing if it just sits in its packet – you’re not going to get much of a meal from one bean seed, or indeed flour from one grain of wheat. It is only in taking the risk of burying that seed in the earth, that abundant life is possible. It is both an end and a beginning, both death and resurrection.

In making his vows today, Jonny is choosing the soil in which he will be planted. As he buries himself in and with Christ, he will prostrate himself – lie face down – before the altar. As we see this, we remember that Jesus too was laid in a tomb. He does not call us to go anywhere that he has not been; as Andrew Marr OSB wrote in his book ‘Tools for Peace’, “Jesus said that we gain life by losing it, and then he died to prove it.” The point of course being that he did not just die, but also rose again, to a new fullness of life, a fullness of life that all of us here today, not just Jonny, are called to realise and to share in.

St. Augustine famously said: “you have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” The commitment that Jonny is making today is both awesome, and very simple: to prefer nothing whatever to Christ. It is only God’s love for him, and his love for God, that makes this possible, as he goes out from here to continue to live into the freedom and the life that God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit holds out for him. This is God’s work both in Jonny and potentially in all of us, the work of a lifetime and of eternity. Jonny, as you continue to bring your restless heart to its true home, I and I’m sure many others here echo the prayer that Abbot Thomas will use shortly: that the one who has begun a good work in you will bring it to completion in the day of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.