

Sermon for Twentieth after Trinity, 2021

Ezekiel 18:25-32. Romans 6:20-23. Psalm 30:1-3 and 13.
Luke 15 11-32.

The Collect: Almighty God, who shows to those who are in error the light of thy truth, that they may return to the way of righteousness: grant that all those who are admitted into the fellowship of Christ's religion may forsake those things which are contrary to their profession, and follow all such things as are agreeable to the same; through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Ezekiel 18:31 'Cast away from you all the transgressions you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit!' But, had Ezekiel heard of 'conscience'? What is it?

Today we live in a society that follows a maxim of 'love and do as you please.' One of my Nurse Directors once said: "Miles, you have to follow your dreams." I thought that sounded a bit glib. He had never followed his! A variant is: 'follow your heart'. Both are wishful sentiments. However, they encapsulate a modern European concept of what is best for an human. It is all about individualism, and applies best to someone with economic freedom. With that you are more likely than a poor person to choose your own path to happiness. The reality is you can only dream a dream when you are not scrabbling for food and warmth. A dream would only have a chance of becoming reality if you had the time and money to do what you fancy. But, if you have obligations to someone other than self, it would be sheer selfishness to abandon them to seek your own nirvana. Saint John Henry Newman criticised the spirit of the Victorian times in which he lived for its subjectiveness and self-centredness that was a counterfeit of conscience. To him conscience is 'the voice of God in the nature and heart of man...it is the internal witness of the existence and law of God.' Conscience only has rights and freedoms because it has duties. God has charged the Church with teaching the truths He has revealed to it. That is why the Church should guide people in the exercise of conscience. You can find a discussion of this here: <https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2019/11/58197/> So, an individual outside the guidance of the Church will struggle to find their true way in life and have inadequate relationships.

Our Collect today says that God shows to those who are in error the light of His truth, that they may return into the way of righteousness. The Prophet Ezekiel reminds the house of Israel that there is a deadly consequence for turning away from righteousness to commit iniquity. St Paul tells the church in Rome that those who are slaves to sin think they are free from doing righteousness. We would say they have no conscience. The reward for living as slaves to sin is death. In the well known parable of the Prodigal Son, the tale contrasts the expectations of a younger son and those of an older son who stays at home. The word 'prodigal' comes from the idea of going forth to be wasteful. In this story, the Father is just as bad in this respect as the returned son! They say that 'the apple doesn't fall far from the tree.' Or, 'like father, like son.' So, it raises the question: is prodigality wrong? The son in effect wished the Father dead so he could have his inheritance early. Was the young son right to 'follow his dreams'? He thought he would be happy if he abandoned his close family in Pembroke Dock to go to Las Vegas! [If you want to consider this parable in more detail, there is a book about it by Henri Nouwen; based on the eponymous Rembrandt picture.] The

young son found that his dream became a nightmare. He had taken advantage of his father's wealth to indulge himself, and returning was nothing more than opportunistic selfishness.

His behaviour contrasted with that of his older brother. But perhaps it wasn't such a contrast when you examine what happened. The older brother was resentful, though not as materialistic as his brother, or father. He took his comfortable lifestyle for granted; not appreciating his Father's generosity. Also, he was resentful of not being made a fuss of. All the characters have a conscience, but it isn't finely honed. Their heart and spirit needs exchanging for a new one. They have a tendency to listen to their conscience only when they are forced to do so. The human voice drowns out the still small voice of God! When Elijah was in a cave, on the run from Queen Jezebel (1 Kings 19:11-13), the Lord told him to go out and stand at the entrance as He passed by in wind, earthquake and fire,... then the still small voice... the sound of silence. God has to get Elijah's attention by physical signs, but then only needs to whisper. How many will listen to their own noisy clamour, and even wilfully stick their fingers in their ears rather than listen to God or the Church? Is that the right heart and spirit for a Christian?

Saint John Newman explained that it is part of the god-given nature of man to be able to detect the voice of God. It's no use having the gift of conscience if nobody listens to it. Likewise, conscience has to be more than *subjective* feelings. It has to point to *objective* truth. As we often remark: it is not enough to believe someone is right just because they are sincere. There must be something measurable about truth. Clamour is vague and comes from the devil. The measure of truth is the Bible as mediated by the Magisterial teachings of the Church. The problem with allowing each individual to proclaim their own truth, referring only to their own understanding of the Bible (*sola scriptura*), is that they might not read or comprehend the Bible without help. The Church helps a person to know what is objectively true. It informs the conscience.

Ezekiel 18:31 reads: 'Cast away from you all the transgressions you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit!' We have conscience as an internal witness to God's law. Our own heart and self-orientated spirit can raise an unhelpful clamour. Listening to God and reading Holy Scripture trains our conscience to help us to deal with our transgressions. We have to make an effort to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest what God feeds us. That is how we come across objective truth. Ignorance is no defence against the wages of sin. Being noisy in our own heads and hearts needs to stop. Peace comes when we are trained in quietness where we can be sensitive to the voice of God through our conscience. It helps us and it makes life better for those around us. Do we not earnestly desire to hear and obey the voice of God?

The Collect for the Fifth Sunday after Easter reads:

Almighty and everlasting God, you are always more ready to hear than we to pray and to give more than either we desire or deserve: pour down upon us the abundance of your mercy, forgiving us those things of which our conscience is afraid and giving us those good things which we are not worthy to ask but through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.