

THE PAROCHIAL SERMONS AND THE SPIRITUALITY OF JOHN HENRY NEWMAN

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THE RECENT Beatification of Cardinal John Henry Newman (1801-1890) by Pope Benedict XVI in Birmingham, England, has brought into view perhaps the most significant figure of nineteenth-century Catholicism. Even in his own time, Newman's reputation as a Christian intellectual and writer was unrivalled. He attracted controversy on account of his theological creativity and conviction, an uncompromising commitment to the deepest principles of Christian faith, particularly as expressed by the ancient Fathers, and what the *Tablet* lauded as the 'great fact' of the day—Newman's high profile departure from the Church of England for the Roman Catholic Church in 1845.

A deep thinker attuned to the delights and fragility of Christian life, Newman penned hundreds of works throughout his lifetime including theological tomes, pastoral collections, letters, essays, devotions and meditations, and narrative poetry.

Elevated to the cardinalate by Leo XIII in 1879, Newman became a touchstone of English Catholicism and some fifteen thousand admirers lined the streets of Birmingham on the event of his death. The *Times* well captured his spirit when it wrote in its obituary, 'Cardinal Newman is gone to that rest which for him will not be happiness if it does not give work to be done.'

Fittingly, Newman's legacy continues to be a source of vitality and challenge for the contemporary Church.

It is this profusion of insight and personal virtue that propel Newman into the prospect of sainthood during our life time. Of course,

as others have acknowledged, the persistent and widespread call for his canonisation over the preceding decades has, to some degree, disadvantaged attempts to make objective assessments of Newman's significance for our day. As the editors of a compelling work on Newman affirm:

Once great thinkers in the history of the Church—Augustine and Thomas Aquinas come immediately to mind—receive the status of 'holy doctors' our perception and presentation of their work, perhaps inevitably, become oversimple and even something of a caricature (Nicholls 1991, 5).

The same phenomenon can be observed following papal elections: an aura of authority and irrevocability is often cast backward over earlier works regardless of their status as personal or speculative reflection. Notwithstanding the danger of romanticism, which threatens to alienate us from our own saints, the Church's recognition of Newman's importance invites us into consideration of his work, the project of reflecting upon the enduring insights of this Victorian clergyman for spirituality in our times.

Much has been written of Newman's life which saw him progress from a non-sacramental, Bible-based Anglican upbringing, through an Evangelical conviction, into the High Church tradition of the Oxford Movement, and then finally to Roman Catholicism. It is a story well documented, including by Newman himself in his *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (1864) which became a best seller on publication.

Readers new to Newman are encouraged to take up Ian Ker's standard account, *John*

Henry Newman: A Biography which has recently been republished and provides a basic introduction to the contexts and content of Newman's array of theological, literary and spiritual works. The *Cambridge Companion to John Henry Newman* was published in 2009 and is a sound introduction for those interested in Newman's theological principles.

While his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1845), *Idea of the University* (1852), and *Grammar of Assent* (1870) count among the most impressive tomes of this material, it is in Newman's numerous parochial sermons, both as an Anglican pastor and Catholic priest, that contemporary readers gain best access to the robust spirituality of its author, a spirituality which underpins and informs Newman's theological writing.

The first volume of Newman's *Parochial Sermons* was published in 1834 and their popularity led to seven more volumes, bringing together a collection of Newman's preaching at St Mary the Virgin at Oxford between the years 1825 and 1843.

Preached without the florid enthusiasm of his evangelical contemporaries, Newman's sermons elaborate a variety of themes which draw their appeal from the power of the Gospel itself: religious truth and error, the basic idea of the Church, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the Incarnation, and the centrality of baptism in Christian life.

The intention of Newman's sermons was to prepare the listener for conversion and to promote the central themes of the Oxford Movement which sought to emphasize the catholicity of the Church of England, apart from the poverty and liberalism of Protestantism and the corruptions of the Roman Church. In the midst of growing secularism, liberalism and non-conformism, Newman sought to reawaken his listener, both in heart and mind, to the elements of an authentically Christian spirit.

The sermons are neither rhetorical nor bland in style and ground themselves in the pastoral concerns of those who gather in the



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Church, inviting the listener to connect the particularity of their lives to the universality of the divine self-disclosure. As such, Newman's preaching outlines a spiritual itinerary or pathway that is not innovative, introspective or sensational in any way but rather attends to the primacy, depth and implication of God's Word for Christian living.

Underlying and directing Newman's spirituality is a philosophic certainty of the existence of truth and so, too, an awareness of the possibility of religious error. Writing in a time in which non-conformist traditions were in the ascendancy, Newman remarks in a sermon of 1830:

All this is fulfilled before our eyes; our religious creeds and professions at this day are many, but Truth is one: Therefore they cannot all be right, or rather almost all of them must be wrong' (Ker 1994, 346).

Confidence in the reality of truth and its unity focuses the Christian on its discernment and pursuit though Newman acknowledges that this is an endeavour fraught with potential danger and misapprehension.

The discovery and embrace of truth will demand first the renunciation of those false measures by which we approach the Gospel and by which we would have ourselves identified. This includes the lure of 'private judgement', a self-devised standard of truth, which Newman held to be the stumbling block of the Dissenters. In his sermon, 'Truth Hidden When Not Sought After', Newman laments:

The present confused and perplexed state of things... these men say... provided we *think* our-

selves right, one set of opinions is as good as another, that we shall all come right in the end if we do but mean well, or rather if we do not mean ill (Ker 1994, 350-1).

A careless indifference to the demands and unity of religious truth undercuts the spiritual life from the outset and leaves one imprisoned by ignorance on all sides.

Newman warns also of the dangers of rationalism in this search for truth, a peril of the Enlightenment legacy. While reason and education are to be prized as necessary helps in the seeking and gaining of truth, Newman holds that:

To rationalise in matters of Revelation is to make our reason the standard and measure of the doctrines revealed' (Ker 1988, 121).

Newman makes clear that we do not know God on account of our own ingenuity or due to any natural talent; we know and approach God as *receivers* of divine self-disclosure. Hence, as Ker affirms, the great lesson of the Gospel for Newman is faith. It is on faith, not self-reliance, that intimate knowledge of the mysteries of God depends. Preaching on the subject of 'The Apostolical Christian' in 1843, Newman supposes that there are many who are:

...not open sinners... do not deny Christ, who honour Him with their lips, [who] are religious in a certain sense, and yet obtain not the crown... They have no claim upon the prize, because they run on their own ground' (Ker 1994, 367).

Neither sheer strength of will nor exertion of the mind are adequate for the seeking and gaining of spiritual truth; rather, truth is sincerely desired and attained in the same measure as we place ourselves in dependence before God, in 'direct faith, obedience and worship' (Ker 1994, 375). This project is the work of a life time, an incessant battle to overcome the illusions of self-sufficiency in their various guises, only at the end of which will come our beatitude:

Let us remember that in its turn the time of labour and fear, and danger and anxiety, will come

upon us; and that we must act our part well in it. We live here to struggle and to endure. The time of eternal rest will come hereafter' (Ker 1994, 354).

Newman's sermons raise the matter of religious truth as a confrontation and a gift that comes with responsibility: to seek out the truth and give oneself to its promise and demand.

In conceiving of spirituality as the endeavour to gain a true view of things, Newman's sermons adeptly penetrate to the inner dispositions which impede everyday people from living in complete availability to God. One of the primary reasons identified for this impoverished condition in Christian life is a failure or reluctance to recognise our own fragile and undisciplined character. In other words, Newman points to a deficit of self-knowledge as a source of our complacency and half-heartedness: 'it is our nature, our *way* not to obey, and *we* do not know this' (Ker 1994, 103).

In order to walk the path of authentic discipleship, then, we must first admit our propensity to mistake good feelings for real religious principle and acknowledge the great distance that lies between our feelings and our acting. In fact, in an 1831 sermon, 'Promising without Doing', Newman contends that our only grounds for trust that we will make good by our actions in Christian life is the fact of our having done so previously,

I would have a man disbelieve he can do one jot or tittle beyond what he has already done; refrain from borrowing aught on the hope of the future, however good a security for it he seems to be able to show; and never take his good feelings and wishes in pledge for one single untried deed. Nothing but *past* acts are the vouchers for the *future*. Past sacrifices, past labours, past victories over yourselves—these, my brethren, are the tokens of the like in store... 'Deeds, not words and wishes,' this must be the watchword of your warfare and the ground of your assurance. (Ker 1994, 104-5).

The Christian life, then, includes profession but is fulfilled only in practice. One who lives in obedience to the Gospel, who com-

mits themselves to act in faith, whether it is serving the needy or curbing one's temper,

...evinces more true faith than could be shown by the most fluent religious conversation, the most intimate knowledge of Scripture or doctrine, or the most remarkable agitation and change of religious sentiments' (Ker 1994, 107).

Thus, the embodied character of Christian spirituality comes to the fore. Newman insists on the necessity of surrender in deed and act, as in the manner of Christ himself who perfectly proclaims and acts upon his promise, 'I come to do your will, O God'.

It was this ability to preach with both insistence and invitation that ensured Newman's sermons offered not simply edification but nourishment in the depths of God's Word and God's plan for humanity.

In 'The Greatness and Littleness of Human Life', a sermon of 1836, Newman demonstrates his ability to cast the light of the Scriptures on the vicissitudes of human experience. Drawing on Jacob's exchange with Pharaoh in Genesis 47, one in which the patriarch curiously describes his 130 years of life as 'few and evil', Newman grounds the shortness of human life in the overriding sense of its great possibility. While each day seems to pass slowly, filled with the various duties and sorrows that all undergo, the years seem to pass by 'as a dream, though we thought it would never go while it was going' (Ker 1994, 231).

This paradox of time, its tedious length and yet ephemeral, fleeting quality, introduces us to the mystery of our own creation and destiny. We detect in the midst of everyday life the presence of a soul and a calling to what surpasses the measure of time. We are baptised into a world to come and from this perspective our worldly pilgrimage appears inadequate:

Our earthly life then gives promise of what it does not accomplish. It promises immortality, yet it is mortal; it contains life in death and eternity in time, and it attracts us by beginnings which faith alone brings to an end' (Ker 1994, 231).

This paradox, of continuity between two worlds, brings to mind the thought of Henri de Lubac, himself a great admirer of Newman, who would remark, 'eternity, which is beyond the future, is not exterior to the present like the future' (de Lubac 1987, 85). For Newman, it is precisely in our experience of present life, both its great joys and disappointments, that we are called to recognise that it is unfinished, incomplete and therefore 'not the whole.' Time calls us to eternity; our experience of the everyday intimates a consummation in the everlasting.'

The imaginative power of Newman's preaching is further exemplified in the concluding passages of this 1836 sermon where he submits,

All that we see is destined one day to burst forth into a heavenly bloom, and to be transfigured into immortal glory. Heaven at present is out of sight, but in due time, as snow melts and discovers what it lay upon, so will this visible creation fade away before those greater splendours which are behind it, and on what at present it depends. In that day shadows will retire, and the substance show itself. (Ker 1994, 235-6).

Here we arrive at the heart of Newman's presentation of the spiritual life, as a way of sanctification that involves an arduous movement from the merely apparent to the real, from the contingent to the eternal. It was a trajectory that appears in *Loss and Gain*, a novel written by Newman in his Catholic years, and was to be the principle that adorned Newman's gravestone, *Ex umbris et imaginibus in veritatem* ('From shadows and appearances into truth'). All the coordinates of Christian life, from the sacred Scriptures, the teachings of the Church, the liturgy, to our bare experience of this passing world are understood by Newman to lead to this realisation, our home in God who alone is real.

In this year of beatification, the parochial sermons of John Henry Newman recommend themselves for spiritual reading as a 'classic' in the Christian spiritual tradition. In their treatment of religious truth and error, their empha-

sis on obedience and self-knowledge, and their reflection on the orientation and destiny of human life, these writings offer nourishment and challenge to all those who enter the path of discipleship. The sermons provide a timely call to watchfulness and vigilance in an age in which spirituality can dissolve into a matter of subjectivity and affect, or else be stripped of its specifically Christian character.

We conclude with Newman's closing remarks in 'The Thought of God, the Stay of the Soul', a sermon from 1839 that carries the distinct voice of its author but, more significantly,

leads us ever closer toward its ultimate subject:

Life passes, riches fly away, popularity is fickle, the senses decay, the world changes, friends die. One alone is constant; One alone is true to us; One alone can be true; One alone can be all things to us; One alone can supply all our needs; One alone can train us up to our full perfection; One alone can give meaning to our complex and intricate nature; One alone can give us tune and harmony; One alone can form and possess us. Are we allowed to put ourselves under his guidance? This surely is the only question. (Ker 1994, 320).

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...if we wished to imagine a punishment for an unholy, reprobate soul, we perhaps could not fancy a greater than to summon it to heaven. Heaven would be hell to an irreligious man [...] thrust into the society of saints and angels. How forlorn would he wander through the courts of heaven! He would find no one like himself; he would see in every direction the marks of God's holiness, and these would make him shudder. He would feel himself always in His presence. He could no longer turn his thoughts another way, as he does now, when conscience reproaches him. He would know that the Eternal Eye was ever upon him; and that Eye of holiness, which is joy and life to holy creatures, would seem to him an Eye of wrath and punishment. God cannot change His nature. Holy He must ever be. But while He is holy, no unholy soul can be happy in heaven. Fire does not inflame iron, but it inflames straw. It would cease to be fire if it did not. And so heaven itself would be fire to those, who would fain escape across the great gulf from the torments of hell. The finger of Lazarus would but increase their thirst. The very 'heaven that is over their head' will be 'brass' to them.

—J.H. Newman, *Parochial and Plain Sermons*. Sermon 1 'Holiness Necessary for Future Blessedness'.