

September 14, 2008

I want to begin this morning's reflections on our text by reading rather a long section from the 19th century Danish thinker, Søren Kierkegaard. It may seem rather unrelated to our gospel reading, and yet the character Kierkegaard calls the "knight of faith" is very close to the type of person Jesus implies as he unfolds God's vision of humankind in the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount. Kierkegaard's concern is what a believer – whom he names "the knight of faith" or perhaps the "champion of faith" – looks like. What features distinguish him or her from any one else? How does the "heavenly" manifest in the way he conducts himself in the world? How does the infinite occur in the finite?

His conclusions are, I suspect, surprising to us. In the first place he argues that true "knights of faith" are very rare creatures and, in the second place, there is no indication about them that they have occupied infinite or eternal places. As I said, it's a long selection, but I think it's worth hearing, and it will broaden our understanding of what Jesus is getting at in his remarks on swearing oaths. Kierkegaard writes:

"I candidly admit that in my experience I have not found any reliable example of the knight of faith... People commonly travel around the world to see rivers and mountains, new stars, birds of rare plumage, queerly deformed fishes, ridiculous breeds of men ... and they think they have seen something. This does not interest me. But if I knew where there was such a knight of faith, I would make a pilgrimage to him on foot, for this prodigy interests me absolutely..."

"As I've said, I have not found any such person, but I can well think him. Here he is. Acquaintance made, I am introduced to him. The moment I set eyes on him I instantly push him from me, I myself leap backwards, I clasp my hands and say half aloud, "Good Lord, is *this* the man? Is it *really* he? Why, he looks like a tax-collector!" However, it is the man after all. I draw closer to him, watching his least movements to see whether he shows any sign of the least telegraphic message from the infinite, a glance, a look, a gesture, a note of sadness, a smile, which betrays the infinite in its contrast with the finite. No! I examine

his figure from tip to toe to see if there might not be a cranny through which the infinite was peeping. No! He is solid through and through.

"One can discover *nothing* of [an] aloof and superior nature ... He takes delight in everything, and whenever one sees him taking part in a particular pleasure, he does it with the persistence which is the mark of the earthly man whose soul is absorbed in such things. He tends to his work... He takes a holiday on Sunday. He goes to church... In the afternoon he walks to the forest. He takes delight in everything he sees..."

"Toward evening he walks home, his gait is as strident as that of the postman. On his way he reflects that his wife has surely a special little warm dish prepared for him... Actually, she hasn't, but strangely enough, it is quite the same to him.

"...he is interested in everything that goes on, in a rat which slips under the curb, in the children's play, and this with the nonchalance of a girl of sixteen. And yet he is no genius, for in vain I have sought in him the incommensurability of genius. In the evening he smokes his pipe; to look at him one would swear that it was the grocer over the way vegetating in the twilight..."

"And yet, and yet—actually I could become furious over it, for envy if for no other reason—this man has made and every instant is making the movements of infinity. ...he has drained the cup of life's profound sadness, he knows the bliss of the infinite, he senses the pain of renouncing everything, the dearest things he possesses in the world, and yet finiteness tastes to him just as good as to one who never knew anything higher, ... as though the finite life were the surest thing of all.

"...He constantly makes the movements of infinity, but he does this with such correctness and assurance that he constantly gets the finite out of it, *and there is not one moment when one has a*

notion of anything else.

"It is supposed to be the most difficult task for a dancer to leap into a definite posture in such a way that there is not a second when he is grasping after the posture, but by the leap itself he stands fixed in that posture. Perhaps no dancer can do it—that is what this knight does.

"Most people live dejectedly in worldly sorrow and joy; they are the ones who sit along the wall and do not join in the dance. The knights of infinity are dancers and possess elevation. They make the movements upward, and fall down again; and this too is no mean pastime, nor ungraceful to behold. But whenever they fall down they are not able at once to assume the posture, they falter for an instant, and this faltering shows that after all they are strangers in the world. ...even the most artistic knights cannot altogether conceal this faltering. One need not look at them when they are up in the air, but only the instant they touch or have touched the ground—then one recognizes them.

"But to be able to fall down in such a way that the same second it looks as if one were standing and walking, to transform the leap of life into a walk, absolutely to express the sublime in the pedestrian—that only the knight of faith can do—and this is the one and only miracle.¹

Now, you probably need to hear or read that all of that again – a couple of times! – to grasp the point fully, but it's beautifully summarised in the last paragraph:

"But to be able to [leap and] fall down in such a way that the same second it looks as if one were standing and walking, to transform the leap of life into a walk, absolutely to express the sublime in the pedestrian—that only the knight of faith can do—and this is the one and only miracle."

Kierkegaard points us to a humanity which is both eternal and worldly at the same time, which lives in the world with the freedom of eternal things, and yet looks just like an

ordinary piece of the world. This is the very humanity of Jesus himself. The church has long spoken of the "incarnation" of God in Jesus, and yet in doing so we tend also to imagine that there would have been something about Jesus which would have *indicated* that he was different. I recall, when I first saw Franco Zeffirelli's television epic *Jesus of Nazareth*, being struck by the fact that the actors chosen to play the young and the mature Jesus had the most amazing, extraordinarily clear eyes. If the eyes are the window to the soul, the choice of those actors was clearly intended to communicate that this particular soul was special, an impression reinforced by camera angles and background music and so on.

Yet to say that Jesus was human is to say that he was in every respect like us – otherwise unremarkable, but for the way in which God was present in his life. But the point is that it was God's presence in his life which made him so ordinary. What we've come to call the "divinity" of Jesus was evident only in his extraordinary humanity – for what the presence of God does is enable the world to be itself – us to be ourselves.

Consider how difficult it is for us to settle for simply being ourselves. I didn't see the front page of *The Age* last Thursday to check whether the same image was there, but on the first edition of the online version of *The Age* viewers were greeted with a picture of the man who would have been Prime Minister – Peter Costello. This in itself is scarcely unremarkable, except that the picture was highly contrived to make a point. Taken from a low angle, and from such a direction that the sun caused a bright-light halo around Costello's head, we were to understand that here was a man with a mission – or perhaps who had a mission. The picture was reminiscent of the famous halo-shot of Bob Hawke 25 or so years ago. In both instances – and in a thousand other less well-known ones – just to be ourselves is not enough. We seek to embellish, to expand, to enlarge our presence or image or appeal or whatever else. We seek to make ourselves bigger than in fact we know ourselves to be. We seek – unlike Kierkegaard's knight of faith – to demonstrate the presence of "the divine" in our lives (and this whether we are believers or atheists). If it is clear that I am close to God, perhaps you will (or ought) to take me more seriously!

And this, finally, brings us to today's gospel reading: "Do not swear by heaven, or Jerusalem, or the hair on your head; simply say 'Yes' or 'No'". We are easily tempted to want to be, or to sound, bigger or better than we are. To an add oath to our declarations appears to us to make

¹ Largely drawn from the translation of Walter Lowrie (Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, Doubleday 1954, p49ff), although emphases added and language "adjusted" for a modern ear, with some guidance from Robert Payne's OUP translation (pp.48ff).

them more significant; to cuss or to swear *at* something seems to us to make more clearer what it is which has annoyed us or frustrated our intentions. It is the same with the striking eyes of Zeffirelli's actors, and the messianic overtones in pictures of our politicians, or swearing on a Bible in a courtroom.

In this type of over-statement two things are declared, both of which mock God and diminish us as God's human creatures. The first thing is that we declare that "normal" is not enough. To use Kierkegaard's image, it is not enough for the knight of faith just to be a thoroughly human bloke who lives a thoroughly human life in a normal place with normal human emotions. More often it seems to us that the things of God are too big for such a life, that they must "make a difference" in some obvious and undeniable way. We desire to *prove* that God is with us, or we are with God, and enhancing our language or image are poor attempts to do just that.

The second problem is that if we imagine that our *amplified* selves or statements are the more true or reliable than our *usual, normal* selves and words, we are kind of saying that it's OK not to be true or honest when we haven't made the oath or cast ourselves in a grander light. To swear on the Bible before giving legal testimony, as often happens at least in TV court-room dramas (if not always in real court rooms), is to imply that I might have been free to lie had I not placed my hand on the Scriptures and declared that I would not. In this way we open up the possibility that here I must tell the truth, and there I need not. In saying that we declare – in contradiction of the gospel – that God is clearly here in this part of the world, but not there in that part.

But, on the direction of Jesus, simply to speak the truth without building it up with the swearing of oaths or other ways of making ourselves or what we say more important – this is to live in the confidence that whether strong or weak, in better and in worse, whether rich or poor, in sickness and in health, we are already whole and complete in the God who loves us just we are. In this love – the love which lets us be ourselves and values us as just that – we are then free *from* the difficult and anxious work of building ourselves up in the eyes of God and of those around us, and free *for* the light burden of living in love.

Just to avoid oaths or swearing or telling lies as Jesus commands will not get to the heart of the matter. This would be merely a moral adjustment which taught us nothing about ourselves in God. The heart of what Jesus calls us to is the free humanity of Jesus himself, a

human being satisfied with himself in relation to his God, and so free to be whatever is required of him by God or by the women and men he came to serve.

This is the humanity God offers us in his Son, and for this reason he gives us the Spirit of liberation. To be a "knight of faith" – a champion in faith – is to know this liberation and, by the grace of God, to become that miracle of a leap of life expressed in a mere walk, the extraordinary capture of the sublime in the ordinary, and to let that be enough for ourselves and for God.

To the glory of God, and for the blessing of us all, may God's Spirit so move among us that more such leaping walking might be discovered among God's people, here and everywhere. Amen.