

The Passions: Enemy or Friend?

Lecture by Bishop Kallistos

Consider the word “wonder.” We have come to a place full of wonder, this ancient pilgrimage town of Vezelay. I can recall very vividly my first visit here when I was a student at university. It was in the year 1954. I was traveling with a party of fellow students in a lorry. It was from the back of that lorry that I had my first view of Vezelay — a city set on a hill — and at the heart of the summit of the city, a great church. Each time I saw Vezelay, as I happened again last night when I came up from the railway station, my spirits rise, and so does my sense of wonder. I have been back ten or twelve times since 1954. Then on entering the basilica, standing in the narthex, you are faced with the marvelous sculpture of Christ in glory, which surely awakens wonder in the many pilgrims who come here.

I don't know about you but a sense of wonder has always been very important in my reading of literature. From the age of 16, there was one genre of Christian literature that particularly attracted me and that was works of fantasy — for example, the stories of George MacDonald. I have always enjoyed the works of fantasy by C.S. Lewis — *Out of the Silent Planet*, *Perelandra*, the *Narnia* books, and above all his retelling of the *Psyche* myth, *Till we Have Faces*. Along with Lewis, I have always liked the supernatural thrillers written by his friend Charles Williams — *War in Heaven* and the rest. And there is of course Tolkien. Such stories reveal the thinness of this world, the nearness of the invisible world.

Once, when a friend of the Anglican writer Evelyn Underhill was going to Iona, her gardener said to her, “Iona is a very thin place.” And she asked, “What do you mean?” The gardener, a Scotsman, said, “There is not much between Iona and the Lord.” Vezelay is another thin place.

We need to be sensitive to the closeness of the invisible world. We need a sense of wonder. “The beginning of the truth is to wonder at things,” said Plato. That's not just Plato — it is good Christianity as well.

Have you noticed how the theme of wonder runs through scripture? For example, in Psalm 76 we read, “Who is so great a God as our God ... Thou art the God who doest wonders.” Or take the prophecy of the Incarnation in Isaiah: “For unto us a child is born and his name shall be called wonderful.” Throughout the Gospels we notice that the reaction of those who hear Christ’s words and witness His miracles is a sense of wonder. Those who first heard the Sermon on the Mount, it is noted, “were astonished at his speech.” When Jesus rebukes the storm, we read they marveled, saying, “Who can this be?” People met Christ with a sense of wonder. Those who heard him teaching at the synagogue in Nazareth “were astonished.” The account of the resurrection in Mark’s Gospel reports that when the women found no body within the tomb, “they trembled and were amazed.” The Greek text says they were “seized by trauma and were ecstatic” — they were taken out of themselves with wonder. At Pentecost, when language is no longer a barrier between peoples, we find them “speaking of the wonderful works of God.” A sense of wonder is a golden thread that runs all the way through holy scripture. If we are to continue as faithful disciples of Christ, we need to unceasingly renew our sense of wonder.

Last night our theme was unity. Jerusalem, we are told, “is built as a city at unity with itself.” We, each one of us, must be a city at unity with ourselves. If we are to be peacemakers, we need to rediscover our inner unity. The great principle about peacemaking is from within outwards. You can’t expect peace to be imposed by governments. It’s got to come from the human heart. From within, outwards — and we might also add from heaven, earthwards.

Our human vocation is to be microcosmos, microtheos — to be a mediator, to unify creation. This was the vocation given to the first Adam in paradise. Failing to fulfill it, in his fall he brought about division rather than unity. But this vocation of mediation is restored to the human race by the second Adam, Christ.

I cannot unify unless I am inwardly at one. As St. Isaac of Syria said, “Be with peace in your own self, then heaven and earth will be at peace with you.”

Now let me put before you a symbol of human unity, this complex unity of spirit soul and body: the symbol of the heart. What do we mean by the heart?

When the late Duchess of Windsor published her memoirs, she drew its title from a quotation by Paschal — “the heart has its reasons, which reason does not understand.” I confess I have not read the Duchess of Windsor’s memoirs from cover to cover, but a brief consultation of that work brought home to me that by the heart, she meant the emotions and affections, perhaps somewhat disordered and wayward emotions. But that was not what Paschal meant, nor is it what Christians mean by the heart.

If we look at scripture, we do not find in the Old or New Testament any contrast between head and heart. In the Bible, we don’t just feel with our hearts — we also think with our hearts. The heart is the place of intelligence and wisdom. In scripture, feeling and thinking are held together. In the Bible, the heart is the conscience — the moral spiritual center of the total person. Evil thought comes from the heart but equally the heart is where the Holy Spirit cries out, “Abba, Father.”

The heart is a unifying concept in another way. Not only does it hold together feeling and thinking, but it transcends the soul-body contrast. The heart is the spiritual organ, the center of our bodily structure, but the heart also symbolizes our spiritual understanding. It’s a point of convergence and interaction for the human person as a whole.

Here is St. Macarius of Egypt writing about the heart: “The heart governs and reigns over the whole bodily organism. And when grace possesses the pastures of the heart, it rules over all the members and the thoughts, for there in the heart is the intellect, and all thoughts of the soul and its expectations. In this way grace penetrates also to the members of the body.”

The heart is the center of the physical organism — when it stops beating, we are dead. But it is also the place where the intellect dwells, the center of spiritual understanding. It is through the heart that we experience grace, and through the heart grace passes to all members of the body. The heart contains, say the Macarian homilies, “unfathomable depths,” including what is meant today by the

unconscious. There are reception rooms and bed chambers in it, doors and porches, and many offices and passages. In the heart are the works of righteousness and wickedness. In it is life; in it is death.

The heart, then, has a central and controlling role. The heart is open on one side to the unfathomable depths of the unconscious, open on the other side to the abyss of God's glory. When the Orthodox tradition speaks of the Prayer of the Heart, that doesn't mean prayer just of the feelings and emotions, it doesn't just mean what in western Roman Catholic spirituality is termed affective prayer. Prayer of the heart means prayer of the total person, prayer in which the body also participates. In the hesychast tradition, entering the heart means the total re-integration of the human person in God.

My spiritual father, Father George, once told me to read Antoine de Saint-Exupery's *The Little Prince*. He particularly liked the words of the fox. "Now here is my secret," said the fox, "a very simple secret: It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye." This is the meaning of the heart in scripture and in the Orthodox spiritual tradition.

Now let's extend the idea of our human unity. We have said our unity as persons includes the body. But what about the passions?

In the account of the Egyptian desert given by Paladius, we read that when he went there as a young man in the fourth century, he was placed under elder Dorotheos, who led a life of severe asceticism. He used to carry stones from one place to the other. Young Paladius thought this was excessive. "Why do you torture your body this way?" "It kills me, I kill it," Dorotheos responded. But was he right? Rather than kill the body, would it not be better to transfigure the body? Another Desert Father corrected Dorotheos, saying, "We have been taught not to kill the body, but to kill the passions." But should we kill the passions? Or should we transfigure them? I feel that the English poet of the seventeenth century, John Donne, comes nearer to the truth when he says, "Let our affections kill us not, nor die." I would agree with the seventeenth century moralist, Sir Robert Le Strange: "It is with our passions as with fire and water. They are good servants but bad masters."

Let's explore this a little more deeply. Unfortunately there isn't a satisfactory translation in English for the Greek word pathos. Pathos is normally translated as passion, sometimes as emotion or affection, or it could be translated simply as suffering — the passion of Christ. There is no single English word that will convey all these different senses. It is linked to the Greek word pascha, which means to suffer. So pathos is fundamentally a passive state. It can be regarded as something that happens to a person or object. The Greek Fathers talk about sleep and death as being pathos and Gregory the Theologian describes the phases of the moon as passions. But often pathos actually acquires a positive sense — it's not some thing merely passive, it can also be something active. And so when we come across this word pathos, or passion, in Greek, we need to look carefully at the context, to see how it is used.

Now behind the Greek Fathers we might look at passion as it is used in Greek philosophy, especially in Aristotle.

When we read the Stoics, we find pathos employed in a negative sense. It means disordered impulses of the soul, an impulse that has got out of hand, that has become disobedient to reason and so is contrary to nature. As with some later Christian theologians, the passions are seen as diseases; the victim of passion is mentally deranged. For the Stoics, passions are pathological disturbances of the personality. The wise man aims at apatheia — dispassion, the elimination of the passions. But alongside this negative view of passion, there is in Greek philosophy, a more positive view. For Aristotle, the passions in themselves are neither virtues nor vices; they are neither good nor evil. We are not commended or blamed because of them. They are neutral. Everything depends on the use that we make of our passions. He includes among the passions, not only such things as desire and anger, but also things such as friendship, courage and joy. So in Aristotle's view our aim shouldn't be to eliminate the passions, but we should try to have a moderate and reasonable employment of them.

Plato has a similar view. He uses the famous analogy of a charioteer with a two-horse carriage. The charioteer represents reason, which should be in control. One of the two horses pulling the chariot is of noble breed, the other is unruly and rebellious. And for Plato the fine

horse denotes the noble emotions of the spirited part of the soul — courage, etcetera — while the disorderly horse represents the baser passions of the desiring part of the soul. The implications of the analogy are clear: if the charioteer has no horses at all, the chariot is never going to get moving, it is no use simply calculating with reason; if your carriage is to get moving, you need to have a proper relationship with the other aspects of your personhood. But the analogy goes further than that. If you have a two-horse carriage and only one horse yoked to it, you won't get very far. The chariot will go askew immediately. In order for your chariot to move straight and far, you must have both horses properly harnessed, and you have to come to terms with both your horses.

So Plato's analogy is holistic — that we've all got to come to terms with all the different impulses in our nature if we are to live a fully human life. We cannot simply repress or ignore certain aspects of our personhood because we don't like them very much. We've got to learn how to use them.

Now with this twofold classical background to consider, what do we find in Christian tradition? The word *pathos* is used only three times in the New Testament: in each instance by Paul and each case in an unfavorable sense. Coming on to the Fathers, many of them take a Stoic view of the passions. Clement of Alexandria, in the early third century, regards passion as an excessive impulse disobedient to reason, contrary to nature. Passions are diseases of the soul, says Clement, and truly good persons have no passions. In the 4th century Evagrius of Pontus, disciple of the Cappadocians but also a Desert Father living the last eighteen years of his life in the Egyptian wilderness, associates the passions with demons. For Evagrius, our aim is to expel the passions. The aim is *apatheia*, though Evagrius gives *dispassion* a positive sense, linking it with love, *agape*.

Gregory of Nyssa takes a similar view. He says that passions were not originally part of our nature, but came as a result of the Fall. For him, the passions, have an animal character. They render us akin to irrational animals. They express our humanity in its fallen condition.

But this is not the only view of passion in the Greek Fathers. Because it's much less well known, I would like to mention the approach of

other writers who come closer to the Aristotelian view. In particular I want to look at Abba Isaiah, who lived in Egypt and then in Palestine during the fifth century. You will find a short extract from his writings in the first volume of the Philokalia. There is a full French translation of his writing, but it hasn't yet been translated into English. Abba Isaiah takes the view that desire — *epythemeia* — along with envy or jealousy, anger, hatred and pride — are all fundamentally in accordance with nature. They are not sinful, fallen distortions, but parts of our human nature as created by God.

Let me read what Abba Isaiah said: “There is in the intellect, a desire that is in accordance with nature, and without desire, there is no love for God.” This is also the view of John Climacus. Though he takes the negative, stoic view of passion, when he discusses *eros*, he takes a more positive view. He says that the erotic impulse, though it may take a sexual form and can often be distorted, can also be directed towards God. *Eros* is not to be eliminated but redirected, transformed. Without desire, *epythemeia*, without *eros*, there is no proper love for God. This is why, remarks Abba Isaiah, Daniel was called “man of desire.” “But the enemy has changed this desire into something shameful, so that we desire all kinds of impurities.”

Then Abba Isaiah comes to jealousy — *zelos* in Greek, a word that can also mean zeal. We lack an English word that conveys both senses together. There is for Abba Isaiah a zeal, a jealousy, “which is in accordance with nature and without which there is no progress toward God. Thus the Apostle Paul says tells us to ‘strive jealously for the good gifts.’” (I Cor 12:31) He might have added that, in the Old Testament, God Himself is described as a jealous God. “But if jealousy directed toward God has been changed within us into a jealousy contrary to nature, so that we are jealous of one another, we envy and deceive one another.”

Then he comes to anger: “There is, in the intellect, an anger that is in accordance with nature. Without anger there is no purity within a person. One must feel anger against all those seeds sown within us by the enemy.” Again and again, in confession I hear people telling me they have been angry, either inwardly or outwardly. I always say to them you shouldn't simply repress your anger. If you sit on it, sooner or later it will explode. What you have to do is to use your

anger in a creative way. The energy in your anger is something good, or something that can certainly be put to good use. When anger takes a negative, destructive form, it is the misuse of something which in itself is implanted in us by God. There is ample evidence in scripture that Christ, on various occasions, felt and showed anger. But this anger, says Abba Isaiah, “has been changed within us so that we are angry with our neighbor over all sorts of futile and useless things.”

Then he comes to hatred: “There is, in the intellect, a hatred that is in accordance with nature. Without hatred against that which is hostile, nothing of value is revealed within the soul.” We are not to be like the oyster hiding quietly in its shell. My spiritual father used to say, “Even the oyster has his enemies.” You needn’t imagine you will win people’s support by doing nothing. “But this hatred has been changed within us into that which is contrary to nature, so we hate our neighbor and loath him, a hatred which expels all virtue.”

Then Abba Isaiah comes to pride. I wondered how can he find a good use for pride, but he does. He says: “There is, in the intellect, a pride that is accordance with nature, that we feel in the face of enemies. When Job found this pride, he reviled his enemies, calling them dishonorable men of no repute, lacking everything good, unfit to dwell with the dogs guarding his flocks. But this pride in the face of our enemies has been changed within us; we have humiliated ourselves before our enemies, and grown proud against each other.” What Abba Isaiah is saying here is that pride, properly understood, is a sense of our own value and meaning, and can be used as weapon against self-pity and despair, against a sense of helplessness and uselessness. But you are not useless. A sense of uselessness is not humility, but a temptation of the devil. Humility is to know that I am made in the image of God; therefore God hopes many things from me. I have a unique vocation. Humility is to say all that I have is a gift.

In the parable of the talents, the master didn’t say to the servant who buried his talent and made no use of it, “Well done, you humble and modest servant. You have done much better than your proud companions who used their gift.” On the contrary, the servant is rebuked who wouldn’t use his gift because he thought he was no good. So, humility is not to say I am useless, but is to say everything that I have is a gift. And pride, understood as the sense of our value

and meaning in God, of our high vocation as an icon of the Holy Trinity that can be put to good use, to be used against the temptations of the devil, who says, “You are hopeless.” There is a good self love, as St. Augustine emphasizes. When we love our true self, we can be proud of our true self. And we can be proud of our true self because our true self is in the image of the living God.

So all these things like anger and pride, which a writer in the Evagrian tradition would regard as demons, are considered by Abba Isaiah as a natural part of our personhood, created by God. Desire or anger is not in itself sinful. What matters is the way in which it is used. Our ascetic strategy is not to mortify but redirect, not eradicate but educate, not eliminate but transfigure.

It is not only Abba Isaiah who tells us that the passions can be put to good use but the later Greek Fathers. For example Maximus the Confessor talks about the “blessed passions” Gregory Palmas refers to “the divine and blessed passions.” He writes that the aim of the Christian life is not the containment of the passions but their transposition or redirection.

Again, I would commend to you the approach of John Donne: “Let our affections kill us not, nor die.” If we can learn to use our passions in the right way, then we should be, each of us, a true peacemaker.