

*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are my ways your ways, says the Lord.*

In the name of the Father...

It's hard to imagine a more concise summary of the events of Holy Week than these words from the prophet Isaiah. What could be more unexpected, more confounding, than the events we are about to witness? What could be clearer evidence of the fact that God's ways are not our ways than the Cross of Jesus? In fact, we might well think of Holy Week as a kind of week-long meditation on the marvellous and baffling ways of God, from Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, to the washing of the disciples' feet, to the Cross and the empty tomb.

And there was a time when it was easier to speak about all of this. There used to be a word that referred to the great and majestic, but often inscrutable, narrative by which God brings about our salvation. It's a word we don't hear very much anymore, at least not in the sense I am referring to, though it appears several times in the New Testament and was a favourite term of the Church Fathers. It is the word "economy", the economy of God or the economy of salvation, or to the Fathers simply the economy.

The problem with the word "economy", of course, is not that it is unfamiliar to us, quite the opposite, we are all-too-familiar with the term as it is used in its secular sense, in the news and by politicians, to refer to the fluctuations of financial markets and business transactions. The problem is rather that this word which once had a rich and nuanced theological meaning has seen that meaning completely eclipsed by its thoroughly prosaic secular meaning. Even to have to speak of the economy "of

salvation” is a novelty of our time. For the Fathers of the Church, the word “economy” would always have meant the economy of salvation, with the ups and downs of trade and commerce a distant second. For us, however, the situation is precisely reversed. *The* economy, for us, is what is happening on Wall Street and in the City of London, with God’s majestic work of salvation somewhere in the background, if it registers at all. And this eclipsing of one meaning of the word economy by the other is by no means an accident, but rather reflects the way in which the one economy has eclipsed the other in almost every sense, in the way we think, in the way we pray, and in the way we see the world.

To take a simple example, we are probably all familiar with the idea that our prayer has a tendency to degenerate into bartering with God, as if God were obliged to give us what we want (salvation) if we give him enough of what he wants (being nice to people, going to church, paying our taxes, etc.). But for all the obvious distortions of this way of thinking, a more or less mercenary approach to prayer is not I think the most serious way the mentality of the marketplace has skewed our thinking about God and about ourselves. Far more troubling an inheritance, it seems to me, is what we might describe as our deeply ingrained impatience of waste and inefficiency. This is not, of course, to suggest that our economy is in any way free from waste or inefficiency, far from it, but rather that the view of the world we have inherited from it is one which places efficiency and productivity somewhere near the very top of its pantheon of virtues, and that this has had a profound impact on the way we think of our lives, our salvation, and above all our sins.

As with so much in life, it is in the practice of prayer that this distorting influence can be most clearly seen. As anyone who has ever made a concerted effort to practice what we rather inadequately refer to as “personal” or “private” prayer will know, perhaps the greatest obstacle we face in this kind of prayer is the enormous waste of time it so often seems to be. To spend half an hour in the day on what often seems to amount to little more than fending off our distracted thoughts goes so profoundly against the grain of our instincts for productivity that it is not long before the clamour of other demands on our time leads us to give up on prayer entirely. And yet, as I will say a bit more about tomorrow, it is this kind of prayer we need above all if we are to recover, and maintain, a perspective on our lives from the vantage point of the economy of salvation.

There is, however, a second and if anything greater hazard associated with this great intolerance of waste in our lives, and that is the way this way of seeing gradually schools us to resist and even to reject the recognition that our salvation is founded entirely upon the mercy of God. This idea, that our salvation is based entirely upon the mercy of God, is something we are often told as if it should be a great comfort to us, as if it were a kind of blanket assurance that everything will be alright in the end, whatever we do. Nothing, I think, could be further from the truth. In fact, as I will say a bit more about on Wednesday, one of the greatest spiritual dangers we face today, precisely because we have so wholly lost touch with a view of our lives from the perspective of the economy of salvation, is that we hopelessly underestimate how difficult it is — and more importantly, how difficult it *will be* — for us to accept the mercy of God.

But in order to prepare the ground for all of this, it might be helpful for me to spell out a little bit more clearly what we mean by the economy of salvation and the difference it makes to think of our lives from its perspective. And that is what I want to do with remainder of this evening.

The word “economy” comes from Greek word *oikonomia* which originally referred to something like “household management” and it’s easy enough to see how in time this might have been extended to refer to the management of the “household” of an entire nation, as we speak of economics today. But when the term was applied to God, especially by the Church Fathers, it meant something much more expansive than this. To speak of the divine economy was to speak not just of the sum total of God’s dealings with humanity, but of the intricate and multi-faceted way in which God works through human history, and through each of our own personal histories, to bring about our salvation. In the New Testament, the word *oikonomia* is sometimes translated as “plan” — as when St Paul speaks of God’s “plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in [Christ]” or the “plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God” — and yet to translate *oikonomia* as “plan” is to flatten considerably a concept which has a far greater density and richness of meaning. To speak of a plan implies a simple, linear progression from A to B. A plan can either succeed or fail, and may at any point need to be scrapped and a new plan put in its place. When the Church Fathers spoke of the economy of salvation, by contrast, what they had in mind was something more like a kind of grand symphony, in which all the many conflicting strands of human history and of each individual life, including the discordant strain of our sin, are creatively woven together and harmonised by God in order to bring

about our salvation. The criterion by which the divine economy is judged, therefore, is not simply success or failure but a certain kind of aesthetic wholeness or “fittingness” as the Fathers put it.

So if that is what the concept of economy means, then what difference does it make to think of our lives in these terms? Well, fortunately there is a single phrase which with remarkable efficiency puts its finger on both the difference this way of thinking makes and where we tend to feel it pinch. And appropriately enough, it is a phrase that comes to us from the liturgy of Easter. It is the Latin phrase *felix culpa*, which we generally translate as “happy fault” and which comes from the great hymn of the Easter Vigil, the *Exsultet*. To quote the line in its entirety, it is: “O happy fault, O necessary sin of Adam, which gained for us so great a Redeemer”. In other words, the liturgy of Easter rather scandalously suggests that Adam’s fall from grace in the Garden of Eden, can in some sense be considered “happy” because it paved the way for the redemption which comes to us in Christ. And yet the implications of this little phrase are far more profound than simply that Adam’s fall was a bad thing which led to a good thing and so in a roundabout way can also be considered a good thing. What the *felix culpa* suggests is that there is a way of thinking about our sins in the light of the divine economy, as not simply the means by which we fall away from God, but as the very means, the very tools if you like, by which God has chosen to bring about our salvation. We are saved, in other words, not despite our sins, but through them.

Now you might be thinking that a single phrase from a single hymn seems a rather flimsy foundation on which to base such a controversial-sounding idea. But in

reality, as its place in the Easter liturgy might suggest, the *felix culpa* is only a spelling out of the fundamental truth we learn this week from the Cross of Jesus. There is nothing controversial I think in the observation that the Cross of Jesus is simultaneously the supreme expression of human sin and the very means by which we are saved, or, if you like, it is the worst thing we have ever done and the best thing that has ever happened to us. What the *felix culpa* spells out is merely that what is true of the Cross is true also, through the Cross, of the entire mystery of human sin. Through the Cross of Jesus and in the marvellous economy of God, even my sins become the very tools of God's great work to bring about my salvation and the salvation of the world.

Another way of understanding the economy of salvation, then, is simply to say that it is the view of human history from the vantage point of the Cross. Viewed from the perspective of the economy of salvation not only does the Cross of Jesus stand at the very centre of human history, the Cross of Jesus *determines the meaning* of the entirety of human history from our creation and fall to our death and resurrection. And that means that what we are celebrating this week is not a fix for something that has gone wrong, but the very reason for which we were created in the beginning.

Needless to say, however, this is precisely the opposite of how we have often been taught to see the Cross. Instead of seeing the Fall in the light of the Cross, we have all too often been taught to see the Cross in the light of the Fall, as a fix for something that has gone wrong, as a supremely wonderful Plan B, but a Plan B nonetheless. And because we find the meaning of our lives in the larger context of this narrative of salvation, then this is also how we have come to see our own lives, as

a long litany of wasted opportunities and failures that has to be written off by the saving sacrifice of Jesus. But in the economy of salvation there is no writing off, there is no Plan B, all things find their place in marvellous and bewildering economy of God, even our sins.

So let me bring this brief introduction to the economy of salvation to a close by posing a question which takes us to the heart of this slippery concept of “economy”. The question is: Is God “economical” in his dealings with humanity, in his bringing about of our salvation? In one sense, of course, the answer is quite obviously no. Nothing could be less economical than the winding and circuitous path by which God works out our salvation, nothing could be less efficient than the great litany of failures and back-tracking that constitutes the story of my life. And yet in another and a deeper sense the answer is thoroughgoing yes, because in the economy of God nothing is wasted, nothing is beyond redemption, not even our sins.

Amen.