



GRAY'S  
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Sermon preached in Chapel on October 27<sup>th</sup> 2019, during a Sung Eucharist in All Saints-tide

*Revelation, chapter 7, verses 9-17 & Gospel of St. Matthew 5.1-12*

Meeting as we do on only certain Sundays, it's inevitable that sometimes we anticipate future events - as we're doing this morning celebrating All Saints a few days early - or catching up on recent events, which is where this sermon begins.

Saints are in the news due to the canonisation earlier this month of Cardinal Newman. The last Englishman to be made a saint was in 1970, when forty of the English Martyrs from the Reformation period were canonised. Among them was a member of this Inn, the Jesuit, St Henry Walpole. Walpole is, as far as we know, the only member of Gray's to have been made a Saint, and next April, in Words & Music, we will focus on the 425<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his martyrdom.

John Henry Newman was born in 1801, and was baptised and ordained as an Anglican. He was a theologian, a poet, a philosopher, a composer, a novelist and a mystic. In 1828 he was appointed Vicar of St Mary's University Church in Oxford, and became a major player in what became the Oxford Movement, seeking to return the Church of England to its more Catholic roots. It was in his church that John Keble preached his famous Assize Sermon on "National Apostasy" in 1833.

His parish included the benefice of Littlemore, on the outskirts of the city. And as he became increasingly disillusioned with the Church of England, he withdrew to Littlemore and established a semi-monastic community there. He walked the fields of his parish, where now, between the parish church and the Cowley Car Works is the Blackbird Leys Estate, where I served for most of the 1980s.

In 1845 Newman was received into the Roman Catholic Church. He went to Ireland, where he helped establish what became University College, Dublin, but he spent most of his new ministry in Birmingham. He was made a Cardinal in 1879. And two weeks ago, in St Peter's Square in Rome, Pope Francis made him a Saint.

What may we say about Cardinal Newman which might help us at this time of All Saints? Let me touch on a few things

He was a man of faith and a man of action. He found in Catholicism, Anglican and then Roman, the framework and the resources to integrate within himself his love for God and his love of neighbour. He loved God with the same heart and mind with which he also loved his fellow creatures. It was a saintly life, but not one without trials and tribulation, especially in deciding to leave the Church of England. He left because he sought the assurance which the authority of the Roman Church could provide, but it wasn't a capitulation to a hard and unchanging institution. We can see that in three ways.

First, Newman wanted to find the Truth, but he was also open to new Truth because he believed that all truth, religious truth and scientific truth, has one single origin, the mind of God himself. He insisted that there need never be any conflict between the claims of Faith and the discoveries of science. All learning brings us closer to the Creator.

That's why he championed the University as a place of open exploration. And in the Church he was criticised for saying our knowledge of supernatural realities is not as precise or as sharp as many would like it to be. He wrote in one of his essays, '... religious truth is neither light nor darkness, but both together; it is like the dim view of a country seen in the twilight, with forms half extricated from the darkness, with broken lines, and isolated masses.'

So he spoke of Development, with a capital D, and the possibility of Change. "To live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often." Today in the Roman Catholic Church there are many who quote Newman in defence of changes around contraception and human sexuality. In the very week of his canonisation the Synod of Amazonian bishops was calling for a review of priestly celibacy.

Second, Newman did not espouse a rigid authority because he believed in Conscience, not in support of an irresponsible individualism, but as a gift from God. He wrote "its very existence throws us out of ourselves, and beyond ourselves, to go and seek for Him ... whose Voice it is." In a Church which often sought to close down debate and impose control he believed in personal responsibility. Maybe that's why it took so long before he became a Cardinal. It's certainly why some American conservatives are suspicious of him to this day, or want to water down what he said.

Third, although he was an academic and a scholar, Newman also embraced Imagination. He firmly believed that music had a special power of raising our hearts and minds to heaven above. His own artistic powers probably culminated in the poem, "The Dream of Gerontius", later set to music by Edward Elgar. In Faith and Life scientific

exploration is transcended by the poetry and music which lifts us out of the mundane. I was reminded of this the other day when the writer Philip Pullman was launching his new novel. Pullman is a noted atheist, but he said: "Rationality is a good servant but a bad master. If you live all your life according to nothing but reason, you never fall in love"

For John Henry Newman this life of faith found expression in two very practical ways. The first was his responsibility as a pastor, especially to the people of Birmingham, where he was known not for his scholarly essays but for his care of the poor and the sick. The second was in his very wide number of friendships, as seen in his Letters. He saw human love as pointer to divine love. Human affections bring us closer to God.

I finish with this. Woody Allen once tried to justify his behaviour with the excuse "The heart wants what the heart wants". Although some attribute the phrase to the poet, Emily Dickinson. It maybe sums up our age, our self-selective attitude to truth and responsibility. Newman points us towards a different path. He took for his motto "Heart speaks to heart". For him the deepest of all Truth was that which comes to us in and through our own hearts, by which he meant the deepest and most personal level of our being. This is the truth which speaks when human hearts are willing to open up to one another, and when our own heart is opened to the heart of Christ. It sounds very like what Jesus was saying in that Gospel reading of The Beatitudes. Perhaps that is what we should mean by being a saint.

Newman would be very happy with what we're doing this morning – liturgy and music which opens up our hearts to the heart of God. He would also challenge us to look at the people and the issues we will meet in this coming week, and ask how we open up our hearts to them.