

ACEDIA SERMON SERIES
Fr Christopher Smith at Prince of Peace Taylors
Advent 1 C 2015
Homilia

In the Opening Prayer, the Collect of the Mass today, we prayed that God may give us the resolve to run forth to meet your Christ. Since we have already started what the world calls the holiday season, the first image that comes to mind is that of a child who bolts out of bed first thing on Christmas morning and runs to see what presents are waiting brought by Santa or the Christ Child. There is something spontaneous about how our little ones literally run to receive gifts that are, as we all, ultimately the gifts of God. But somewhere along the line, as we get older, we lose some of that joy and excitement of Christmas, and by the end of 25 December, we are often tired and bored of it all and ready to get back to normal.

But the Church proposes to her children a different way. She wants us all to have the joy and excitement to run towards Jesus and receive Him with love. We don't really do what has become the holiday season. Today we start that penitential season of joyful expectation called Advent, and what we look forward to, is not a little baby in a manger at the end of this month, but that little baby grown into the Judge of the Living and the Dead that we will meet at the end of the world. We know this, at least in part, and so it's easy for us to look at how we have betrayed the innocence of childhood, the beauty of innocence, and lose ourselves in nostalgia for a past in Bethlehem and ignore our future at the feet of Christ when there will be a new heaven and a new earth.

But how do we get all of that beauty of childhood, purity of grace, back? Why does it seem so often that we don't have the resolve to run forth to meet Christ, whether He invites to come and adore Him in the manger or to account for our lives at the final judgment? Have you ever, or are you now, experiencing weariness, melancholy, feeling overworked, discouragement, instability activism, boredom or depression? The early Fathers of the Church talked about this phenomenon a lot. They looked for a word to describe it. The Ancient Greeks said that when someone was so dehumanized that they could not even bury their dead loved ones, they possessed a lack of care: *akedia*. Evagrius of Pontus, one of the Desert Fathers of the fourth century, borrowed the word to describe a state of soul when our spiritual life has been dehumanized and dechristianized. Remember that the early Christians thought of the Christian life in terms of the Exodus: we leave the Egyptian slavery of sin by crossing the Red Sea by baptism, and begin a spiritual journey our whole life, wandering through the desert, which ends up in the Promised Land of heaven.

Acedia is that enduring complication of life that exhausts us. Interestingly enough, it is a phenomenon which any of us can recognize, but which spiritual writers are becoming less and less attuned to. In 1996, Christoph Cardinal Schönborn, Archbishop of Vienna, preached a retreat at the Vatican and noted that acedia is the most forgotten topic of modern morality, and also the root cause of the greatest crisis in the Church today: we are all tired of wandering in the desert!

Evagrius writes that there are five principal manifestations of acedia, which is a word that can't adequately be translated by any similar word in English. The first is an interior instability: we got to move around and distract ourselves constantly, we get bored too easily. Second, an exaggerated concern about our own health: we either obsess over body image or gorge ourselves in gluttony. Third, we have an aversion to manual work: chores, daily household tasks drive us wild. Fourth, minimalism in our spiritual life and the our duties, or maximalism in lacking discernment in doing them well. And finally, general discouragement: we want to leave the arena of our spiritual battle, we want to abandon our vocation, whether it be to work, to marriage, to religious life, and give up.

So why are we talking about this now? Doesn't all this sound more like a series of sermons for Lent rather than Advent? Well, not exactly. Advent is when we prepare for our final encounter with the Lord, the same Word that takes on flesh in the Incarnation. It is the beginning of a new liturgical year in which we commemorate in ritual form all of the mysteries of salvation history. It is time to begin again, and if we are afflicted by acedia, which is not something you're going to find in self-help books in the Psychology section of Barnes and Noble, we have to know what it is and how to overcome it. I have mentioned for your spiritual reading this Advent a book by the current Abbot of Saint Wandrille in France, *The Noonday Devil: Acedia, the Unnamed Evil of Our Times*. It will also form the core of our preaching this Advent. This Sunday, we are going to talk about what acedia is. Next Sunday, we are going to talk about the remedies for it. On Gaudete Sunday, on how Christ is the solution for it. And on the last Sunday of Advent, how to be spiritually fruitful, so that when Christmas comes, we can be renewed in spirit and be able to celebrate the feast with joy.

But for now, back to acedia. St Thomas Aquinas says that there are two parts to acedia: one, sadness about spiritual good. He writes that man can be sad in the presence of God because for His sake we must renounce carnal, temporal, limited and apparent goods that are immediately attainable for the ultimate good that is attainable only by the free gift of God in heaven. Two, a sluggishness which prevents us from bringing acts to their fulfillment. We are paralyzed in doing good works, charity dies in us and we become indifferent to love. St Thomas goes on that acedia produces all kinds of effects in us: we try to flee whatever saddens us, we seek out things to compensate for our sadness, we lack courage, we get angry at people, we struggle against spiritual good itself, we seek out unlawful things, and we finally end up in despair.

Acedia is something that affects our relationships, as well. And it is particularly common and destructive in married couples. How does it manifest there? First of all, we experience hatred of the joy of marriage, and we want to leave it. St John Paul II reminded us, "The only place where self-giving in its whole truth is possible is marriage." Every day of a marriage has to be a return to the first day if it is to not succumb to acedia. If not, the spouses withdraw from each other, into themselves. They lose their openness to children, they become closed to life, and then the unity between them suffers. The monks of old wanted to flee their cells

when they were afflicted with acedia, married couples today, when they suffer through this, seek out compensations outside the home. They keep themselves busy with anything and anyone they can outside the family. And then they start looking for novelty: someone else to fulfill them, somewhere else to be, apart from the partner God gave them. Divorce and adultery are not sins that just kind of happen: their way is prepared for when our hearts give into the noonday devil of acedia. It can happen to any of us, and to the best of us.

On this First Sunday of Advent, let us ask ourselves whether the phenomena associated with acedia register in our hearts. During this first week, let us come to the Lord and ask Him for the grace to start a new life in Christ as we start a new liturgical year. Let Advent be a time, not of losing ourselves in the busyness of a holiday season, but of losing ourselves in an ocean of mercy, of losing ourselves in the joys of heaven.

Advent 2 C 2015

Last week we began our sermon series for Advent on the spiritual phenomenon called *acedia*. You'll remember St Thomas Aquinas describes it as having two parts: sadness about spiritual good, and a sluggishness which prevents us from bringing good acts to their fulfillment. I have to admit I wasn't sure about trying this series right now, but I have had so many of you come up to me to tell me you needed to hear this and wanted to buy the book by Abbot Nault I mentioned last weekend, that I hope I am on to something. *Acedia* is more than just sloth, it's more than just one deadly sin: it's a whole state of being which threatens our spiritual life and that of the whole world. Last week we went into detail about what *acedia* looks like. And I promised that this week, we look into the some of the remedies for it.

Now, before we get into that, though, I want to remind you that we have to avoid the heresy of the fifth century British monk Pelagius. He taught, wrongly, that holiness was something we were able to bring about ourselves. Our modern age loves this heresy. Self-help books and the power of positive thinking are not always bad, but they often carry within them this idea that we can will ourselves into being happy, and the religious version of this is that we can will ourselves into being justified in the sight of the Lord.

But Jesus is the source of all good, and we can only be good and holy and happy by His grace. That is all the unmerited gift of God. We can pray for it, we can dispose our souls towards it by performing certain actions and avoiding others, but it comes from God. And so, if we are to be healed from *acedia*, that healing has to come from God, and it will come in His time and as He wills. But we can till the soil of our heart, as it were, so that God can plant the seeds of righteousness and peace in our heart, and the waters of grace can cause us to be spiritually fruitful. Advent is an acceptable time, because our salvation is nearer to us now than it ever has been before, when we can begin again, when we can watch and wait upon the Lord and for Him to deliver us from the noonday devil of *acedia*.

The spiritual writers of the ancient world took all of this dreadfully seriously, but they also knew how to combat it as well! But it also bears repeating that they did not always distinguish between that which was properly spiritual and that which was properly psychological. Science has given us many gifts which cause us to realize much more about depression, which can accompany *acedia*. But depression has its own program of healing, and sometimes that involves better living through chemistry and there is nothing wrong with that. We cannot pretend that we can just pray away something which is not essentially a spiritual or a moral problem. Likewise, there are realms of the soul where not even the best psychotherapy or drug treatment can penetrate. Counseling can help relieve feelings of guilt over the indiscretions of your past. But it can never absolve you from sin, and free you from eternal punishment that you merit because of it!

Evagrius of Pontus, our Desert Father who has helped us understand *acedia* so much, proposes five remedies that can predispose the soul for the healing grace of God. First of all, that we turn to God in tears. We must acknowledge that we cannot do it on our own and that we need a Savior. Psalm 41.6 says, *Why are you saddened, O my*

soul, and why do you trouble me? Hope in God, and I shall confess Him, the salvation of my face and my God. Spiritual writers have always talked about the gift of tears. In the old Missal there was even a Mass formulary to ask for the gift of tears. Like water that falls on a hard rock and over time penetrates it, our tears over our spiritual situation can soften our hearts for grace to overwhelm it. Our culture tells us to flee anything that makes us sad. While it is true that God does not tolerate sad-faced saints, there is something about that quiet time we have with God in which our tears of sorrow can purify and actually strengthen us.

Second, Evagrius says that we have to persevere in work. It doesn't really matter what kind of work, but some work: "Perseverance is the cure for acedia, along with the execution of all tasks with great attention. Set a measure for yourself in every work and do not let up until you have completed it." Often we go through life and just do stuff without thinking of it at all, much less intentionally doing it as well as possible for the glory of God. Work is not just a punishment and a burden for original sin. When we do it to the best of our ability in a measured and prudent way, we sanctify ourselves and the workplace.

Third, the way of contradiction. Psalm 137 has a verse which, if we take it literally, can be terrifying: *O daughter of Babylon, you devastator, happy shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them upon the rock.* Those little ones are the thoughts in our mind which drive us crazy, tempt us, distract us, the ones that St Teresa of Avila describes as the crazy old aunt banging around in the attic of our mind. We take those thoughts and crash them against the rock of Christ. We take the thought and mentally crush it against Jesus the Rock. We rebuke the demons and seek refuge in prayer. Those short little arrow prayers, aspirations, like *Jesus have mercy on me, a sinner,* or *O God, come to my assistance.* We use the Word of God as little arrows from the ramparts of our heart to take out the enemies that keep crawling into assail us. Which is why we must meditate upon and memorize Holy Scripture. If Jesus can throw the Word of God into the face of Satan and vanquish him on the Temple Mount, why can we not do the same?

Fourth, meditation on death. Time has a direction and a meaning. Once a day, we should imagine ourselves at the hour of our death and ask, where would we go at that moment?

Fifth, increasing our faithfulness to our daily routine and daily life. The monastic fathers were instructed to do whatever they wanted as long as they did not leave their cell. They could eat and drink and pray and whatever, but leaving their cell would open them up to being destroyed by acedia. For us, we should not leave even for a second, or try to escape the duties of our state in life and its demands. Do the laundry. Spend time with the mother in law. Don't come in late to work. Persevere.

We should do all of these things, and do them in moderation. Evagrius writes, "A wandering mind is strengthened by reading and prayer. Passion is dampened down by hunger and work and solitude. Anger is repressed by psalmody, long suffering and mercy. But all these should be done at the right times and in the proper measure. If they are used at the wrong times and to excess, they are useful for

a short time. It is harmful in the long run.” So if you are the father of a family who has to work to make a living, don’t spend all night in the adoration chapel and fast all day when you have a job that requires physical labor. But it may mean you choose one power hour a week during the night, and fast from one type of food on one day a week.

The point of these five remedies is that acedia is the temptation to draw away from the present and seek refuge in imagination. They keep us tied to the real, and the spiritual life is an engagement with what is, not with what we think things should be in an ideal world. It is not becoming the ideal self, but the truly real self. To the five remedies of Evagrius I want to add a sixth. Not that I am a spiritual master by any means, but I think we need to add another one. To have a sense of humor.

If we take ourselves too seriously, and we obsess over our faults, we will just feed into the downward spiral. Yes, we should in our private prayer time turn to the Lord with tears, but we should also get up and have a healthy sense of irony about ourselves. We have to be able, not to criticize ourselves, but to laugh at ourselves. I’m thinking of an episode in the life of two of my favorite saints. St Francis de Sales’ best friend was a remarkable woman called St Jean Francoise de Chantal. After her husband died, she wanted to live the religious life. But she also had a penchant for low cut dresses to show off her ample gifts from God, and so Francis came up to her one day and said, “Those who don’t mean to entertain should take down their signboard!” They both giggled for days over that one, he didn’t mean to offend and she didn’t get offended, and she went on to found the Sisters of the Visitation and both of them are known for their incredible spiritual works.

This Advent, I think many of us here in church know that we are afflicted by the noonday demon of acedia. There is hope, and there is help. During this second week of Advent, let us meditate upon and put into practice those six remedies. Next Sunday we celebrate Gaudete Sunday, and we will look at Christ, who is the definitive remedy and the cause of our joy.

Advent 3 C 2015 Homilia

There is a fascinating question St Thomas Aquinas asks: *What happened in your soul when it had its first thought?* He answers that the first movement of the will is love, which begins in desire and ends in union. We desire something, someone, and so we search out everything in our world and our experience to fulfill that desire. And then, when we find it, we want to possess it we want it to be ours, to be united as much as possible with it. But there is something about this life which means that we are always kind of stuck in the beginning: we wrestle constantly with desire, and we never quite feel totally at rest, do we? As spiritual writer Thomas Dubay points out, “Even after the most thrilling experience, when you are quiet and alone, you perceive deep down a small voice saying, ‘Is that all there is?’ Nothing is enough: not praise, not success, not youth, not love. You are a thirst.”

What an image: not that you are thirsty, but that you yourself are a thirst. Advent is a time when we get in touch with the fact that we are a thirst. The whole history of humanity, and the personal story of each one of us, is a story of unfulfilled desire. All religions throughout time attest to a desire for transcendence, for something other than the self. The sacred history of the Old Testament is one long hymn to seeking God. In the Psalms, we read that powerful verse: *As the deer pants for flowing streams, so my soul pants for you, O Lord.* We seek something out with lots of energy. As the patriarch Jacob in the Book of Genesis 29 lay dying, he gathers his sons around them and says, *The blessings of your father are mighty beyond the blessings of the eternal mountains, the bounties of the everlasting hills, may they be on the head of Joseph.* We want to be like the young Joseph and experience the desire for those blessings which are eternal. The prophets time and again expressed this longing for the coming of the Lord. Isaiah 9 foretells the day when people will say, *You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy, they rejoice before you as with joy at harvest.* All of the sacrifices of the Old Covenant and of pagan religions sought out union with the God they desired.

But they could not have it on their own merits, try and hope as they might. All of the religious ceremonies and beautiful philosophies and powerful art and architecture which express this desire for the everlasting hills of divine blessing could not bring it about. It is even a truth of the Catholic faith, defined at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215: *Between the creator and the creature there can be noted no similarity so great that a greater dissimilarity cannot be seen between them.*

So, is that it then? Is what it means to be human exhausted in the desert, always wanting, always waiting, always so very thirsty, and aware that we are lacking what completes us? This Advent we have talked a lot about the phenomenon of *acedia*: the noonday devil which causes us to think that all there is to the human condition is failure to achieve what the heart so much desires: to be united with Love itself. That *acedia*, that painful sluggishness that despairs of God and of the possibility of finding love, that *acedia* that threatens to kill the soul: is there any way out?

Rejoice in the Lord always, again, I say, rejoice! The Introit for today's Mass, Gaudete Sunday, from Philippians 4.4, takes for granted that we are in this desert of

acedia and then tells us to rejoice. But how? Why? The first letter of John, chapter 4, gives us a clue: *The love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent His only son into the world, so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that He loved us, and sent His Son to be the expiation for our sins. If we love one another, God abides in us.*

We can rejoice because, even though there is an infinite distance between you and God, He chose to bridge the gap. We stood on this side of an uncrossable abyss, unable to move, with only the faintest idea that there might be something else out there for us. But He, out of no other motive than love, sends us Son to take on our human nature, to become one of us. God is no longer an otherworldly power with an unprouncebale name. He is Emmanuel: God with us. He comes to us, so that we need not go far to find Him. In the Incarnation of the Son of God, everything changes and the desert does not have to be the only and final word. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15. 54: *When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: Death is swallowed up in victory. O Death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?*

The enfleshment of the Son of God is a great and wondrous exchange: the Living One has put on the flesh of death, the Immortal One has taken on the limitations of creaturely exist, but not just to experience them, but so that in and through our flesh, our limitations, and our creaturehood, we may overcome them and go by, with and through the flesh of the Savior come to immortality, and eternal life. Today we rejoice because we know that in Bethlehem a child was born, the Prince of Peace, who would make it possible to for the noonday devil, and every other kind of evil and suffering and pain, to be vanquished. Today we rejoice because we know that the same Jesus Christ, born in poverty in a stable surrounded by farm animals, will come back again in majesty and glory surrounded by legions of angels and saints. Today we rejoice because, even though in this life we see as through a glass darkly, we have the promise of eternal life.

The Word was made flesh and dwells among us, and so that is the reason for the hope that is within us. We take all of our desires, and all of our anxieties, and all of our weaknesses, and we bring them to the stable. For there, and only there, do the sands of the wilderness of our journey fade into night, and by the light of a star we are ushered in at the sound of angel voices to the highest pinnacles of glory.

Advent 4 C 2015 Homilia

Throughout Advent we have been exploring the phenomenon of *acedia* in the spiritual life. Last Sunday, as we marked that joyful half way point of this season, we talked about the nearness of Christ who is the ultimate cause of our joy. And this final Lord's Day of Advent we talk about what makes us spiritually unfruitful and spiritually fruitful in the battle against the noonday devil.

As Christmas approaches and we commemorate the coming of the Prince of Peace, we are all far too aware that all over the world there is still violence, war, and injustice. And we know the swords will not be made into ploughshares until Jesus comes back at the end of the world, but he asks us to be peacemakers anyway in the meantime. But how can we do that if we have fight all these people who want to sow disorder, chaos and violence in the world. Well, first of all, we have to realize that we could just as easily become as destructive and horrible as those people who end up in the news for any number of atrocities. Think about it: how many of those people were once innocent little children who sang Christmas carols at the creche, or looked up at their mothers with love in their eyes, or played with friends with trust and happiness, and then grew up to be monsters? Yes, it is true, some people are just sick, and that's why they become the way they do when they get a little older. But *acedia* is a spiritual illness which claims a lot of those victims too. When we cease to be spiritually fruitful, we literally grow up to become, not harbingers of peace and joy, but frightful incarnations of the anti-Christ.

This does not happen overnight. It starts out with nihilism: that spiritual depression which causes us to reject the very notion as objective truth as nonsense. They are the Ten Commandments, not the Ten Suggestions, and repeated mortal sin kills the soul and makes us doubt the truth that is revealed by God. It stops us in our tracks, paralyzes us where we are, when God has created us to journey to worship Him in glory at the guidance of a star: the light that comes from His Church. We renounce God, and then we realize we have nothing. We have given ourselves freedom to choose evil as well as good, and then we sink into a sorrow which is proper to the world. We set up idols for ourselves in God's place in our hearts, and we see them fall one by one. And so despair sinks in. *Acedia* is a lack of the Great Love, it shatters hope and rejects life itself. As Pope Benedict XVI wrote in this situation, "all love becomes the disappointment of finiteness in a world whose monstrous surrogates are a pitiful disguise for despair." In Genesis 3.17, God tells us if we eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, we will die. And it begins to happen.

The bad fruits we have chosen to eat in the garden of earthly lights are many. The perpetual need for change, anything to ease our boredom, we fly as far away as we can from the presence of God so He cannot disturb us, we think we are becoming more realistic, but in reality, we are becoming more narrow-souled, we are faint hearted, and lose courage to proclaim the presence of God in the midst of the world.

We reject our greatness as children of God called to be holy. We become falsely humble and experience sadness over good.

During this series we have referred to acedia noonday devil. Why? We usually associate the devil with darkness, with night. But in Psalm 90.6, we read, *You will not fear the terror of the night, the arrow that flies by day, the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, not the destruction that wastes at noonday.* The monks of the desert noticed that at noon, with the sun at its zenith, there were no shadows. In other words, there is no mystery: The sun seems to have halted, and time stops: the present can seem unbearable.

But when the sun moves, and shadows, the mysteries, return, we can go on. Too much light hurts the eyes; we can go forward even in the darkness when someone is holding our hand. Christ, the Light, holds our hand through the darkness of the night of faith, to the promised land of glory with the Father.

We let Christ hold our hand through the night of faith by adopting those spiritually fruitful practices which lead us forth from acedia. What are they? First, we must intentionally resist the temptation to quit the spiritual battle and become a spectator; we choose to stay in our place. We recognize that this place is when where there is profound desire, and we must desire God and hope in Him, and nothing else. We hear that temptation, "What good is it to stay, if I no longer believe? Wouldn't it be more honest I just left" my family, my spouse, my work, my church?

To resist and to persevere means that we have to realize that God does have a plan in all this. There is a love that precedes me and calls me, there is a love that will never die. The Book of Deuteronomy repeats to the children of Israel, and to us, too, *Do not forget!* And so we intentionally remember that love. But the best place to do that is the Eucharist: when Jesus institutes the memorial of the love of His Passion and Death, He orders the apostles, *Do this in Memory of Me.* The Eucharist is no boring and vain repetition: it manifests God's faithfulness. The Eucharist connects past, present and future and catches up into it. The Church's liturgy becomes what gives true meaning to the passage of time, because it alone connects time.

When we come to the Eucharist, we have a foreshadowing of that joy which is ours in heaven. The spiritual fruit of desire for God from the place of our battle leads to the joy of possessing God and His possessing us. As Pope Francis once preached: "DO not be men and women of sadness: never give way to discouragement. Ours is not a joy of having many possessions, but from having encountered a person: Jesus. Joy is born from knowing that with Him we are never alone. We accompany, we follow Jesus, but above all we know that He accompanies and carries us on His shoulders. This is our joy, our hope. Christ's cross embraced with love never leads to sadness, but to the joy of having been saved and doing a little of what He did on the day of His death."

My friends, the shadow of the Cross is cast even over the Christmas crib. The Lord whose coming we celebrate this week grew up and took upon Himself all of our pain, all of our sin and all of our anxiety. As we come to the stable, guided by the light of a star, let us come with joyful hearts, knowing that we have already been

saved from the noonday devil and every other evil. Open wide the door of your hearts to Jesus, and let the King of Glory enter.