The Prayer of the Ox

December 10th, 2017

2nd Sunday of Advent

On the first week of Advent, we began building a nativity icon of words, and we looked at the donkey as likely there with the infant Jesus and thus the first animal in our icon. Today, I invite us to look at the ox. One thing Advent teaches us is that we never have enough time. As we rush from appointment to appointment, from shop to shop, from office to bank, from church to home, we feel the stress and burden of the time we do not have. The countdown to Christmas and the end of the year, and the year at its darkest in the northern hemisphere, can feel apocalyptic some days. In reality, this is just a magnification of our general sense of life as we get older. Day by day, we are being thrown headlong into that good night. Though we experience time, time is not something we possess. Time is beyond our reach and control. And time has forever, since the dawn of time, been one of the means for controlling, exploiting and enslaving people, whether on a Roman galley or in a modern factory. Carmen Bernos de Gasztold must have felt the crushing current of time's flow when working at the silk factory, when abiding by wartime curfews, when hearing air raid sirens, when struggling to make a living in a broken country, when living without any certainty whatsoever if each day would be the last. I wonder if such disquiet filled her thoughts as she penned her "Prayer of the Ox" (*Prayers from the Ark/ The Creatures' Choir*. Tr. Rumer Godden. London: Penguin, 1974. 53):

Dear God, give me time.

Men are always so driven!

Make them understand that I can never hurry.

Give me time to eat.

Give me time to plod.

Give me time to sleep.

Give me time to think.

The ox is a working animal, an animal pictured in numerous nativity icons. In a 15th Century Novgorod icon, the ox is there by the manger where Jesus is laid. In fact, Jesus is pictured lower than the ox to remind us of the utter humility of his Incarnation. As the apostle would later write: "though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness" (Phillipians 2:6-7). The ox in Gasztold's poem is the model contemplative, desiring time to eat, time to plod, time to sleep, time to think. There is a hint of the Benedictine *regula* here. When we look back on the prophets of Israel, we can see that they too saw how their people had no time. Read the book of Daniel, as God reveals how one age succeeds another, empires rise and wane, and Israel must wait, wait, and wait while God prepares salvation: "Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever. But you, Daniel, keep the words secret and the book sealed until the time of the end. Many shall be running back and forth, and evil shall increase…I heard but could not understand; so I said, 'My lord, what shall be the outcome of these things?'...He said, 'Go your way, Daniel, for the words are to remain secret and sealed until the time of the end. Happy are those who persevere and attain the thousand three hundred thirty-five days. But you, go your way, and rest; you shall rise for your reward at the end of the days.'” (Daniel 12:2-13).

The angel teaches the prophet that a new kind of gift is coming, a reward at the end of days. The end of time is really the gift of time, and the gift of time is the gift of peace. In Christ, in the eternal time of the kingdom of heaven, the ox has all the time of eternity. As Jesus says in his high priestly prayer: "And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (John 17:3). The birth of the Saviour breaks up worldly time and ushers in God's time. Our lectionary reading today begins with this proclamation: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Mark 1:1). I believe this was Mark's title for his book. Search through the pages of the Gospel of Mark, and see if you can find a place where the author says "the end of the good news." You will search in vain. The good news is always beginning. And the Greek work *arche* not only suggests a beginning, but a boundless origin, a great universal cosmic mystery *ab origine*, the reason, motive, and force of all things. The beginning was the good news, and the good news is now beginning for us again because it is being made manifest to the world in Jesus. It is a moment of recreation. Christ is coming into the world. Mark does not mention the nativity—he is in a hurry to tell the story of Jesus. Most of his Greek verbs are in the present tense. The good news is happening now, even now as he pens it some years after Jesus' resurrection, even now, some two thousand years after his resurrection; even now, Jesus is coming into the world—it is the beginning of the good news.

And Mark speaks of preparation—first, through faith in the word of God given to the prophets hundreds of years before, and then through the confessing, repenting work of the last prophet, John the Baptist: "As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight, "'John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins" (Mark 1:2-5). Faith and repentance prepare us for Christ. Are we prepared to have faith and receive the promise from God? Are we prepared to repent to receive Christ and receive the gift of time? John the Baptist acknowledged in all humility the tremendous import of receiving Christ: "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals" (Mark 1:7). Though the Messiah humbled himself to be born a servant, his humility invites our humility, for who are we before Him? Who are we before the living and holy God who has come among us? Though our hearts could scarcely contain him, our hearts must open to receive Him in all of his power, majesty and radiance. As we sing in the Christmas carol, "Let every heart prepare Him room" (*Joy to the World*). To be humble is to make the paths straight, to confess our need of Christ, our need of His peace and of His time. It is to pray the ox's prayer. Though we continue to work for our hourly or monthly wages, though we continue to live in the world's time, the time of deadlines and appointments, the time of losses and regrets, the time of trying to catch buses and trains, the many times within the labyrinth of history and time, we do not belong to it anymore. In Christ, we have eternity, we have the kingdom and its peace in our hearts. There is nothing that can slow down the coming of the good news. There is only the angel's benediction: "Go your way, and rest; you shall rise for your reward at the end of the days" (Daniel 12:13).

The prayer of the ox is a prayer of utter humility, of turning to God to order our time, of asking God for the precious gift of time and peace. The image of the ox also brings to mind some rich symbolism in Scripture regarding righteousness and justice. Oxen figured in the decorations for Solomon's temple (2 Chronicles 4:4-15) and in the visionary experiences of Ezekiel (Ezekiel 1:10), Daniel (Daniel 4:25-33) and John (Revelation 4:7). The ox, very much like the donkey, is a symbol of work, strength, life, but also humility and patience. The donkey is humble in his work. And in Scripture, Balaam's donkey, though beaten severely, could see the angels that his sinful rider could not. Likewise, the ox is also a symbol of patience and humility, the one who bears the yoke. Proverbs 14:4 says: "Where no oxen are, the manger is clean, but much revenue comes by the strength of the ox." It was also a symbol of livelihood, as we read of in Job: "They drive away the donkeys of the orphans; they take the widow's ox for a pledge" (Job 24:3). The Law taught that people were to care for each other's livestock: "You shall not see your brother's ox or his sheep going astray and ignore them. You shall take them back to your brother. And if he does not live near you and you do not know who he is, you shall bring it home to your house, and it shall stay with you until your brother seeks it. Then you shall restore it to him. And you shall do the same with his donkey or with his garment, or with any lost thing of your brother's, which he loses and you find; you may not ignore it. You shall not see your brother's donkey or his ox fallen down by the way and ignore them. You shall help him to lift them up again" (Deuteronomy 22:1-4). Even the rights of the ox were covered in the Law, for it is written: "You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain" (Deuteronomy 25:4). We live in societies that muzzle the oxen constantly in various ways. Jesus, who came to teach true righteousness and justice, is lain in the kind of manger that served the oxen. Balaam, the man who beat his donkey, the very one hired by the enemies of God's people to curse them, found that he could do nothing but bless the people of God, and he compared God's strength to the strength of the ox: "Behold, I received a command to bless: he has blessed, and I cannot revoke it. He has not beheld misfortune in Jacob, nor has he seen trouble in Israel. The Lord their God is with them, and the shout of a king is among them. God brings them out of Egypt and is for them like the horns of the wild ox" (Numbers 23:20-22). God's blessing comes to us through Christ with power, with the strength and formidable horns of the ox!

Lastly, oxen figure in the prophet's depiction of the coming peace that the Messiah will bring: "The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox" (Isaiah 11:7); "Therefore the Lord waits to be gracious to you, and therefore he exalts himself to show mercy to you. For the Lord is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for him. For a people shall dwell in Zion, in Jerusalem; you shall weep no more. He will surely be gracious to you at the sound of your cry. As soon as he hears it, he answers you. And though the Lord give you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, yet your Teacher will not hide himself anymore, but your eyes shall see your Teacher. And your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, 'This is the way, walk in it,' when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left. Then you will defile your carved idols overlaid with silver and your gold-plated metal images. You will scatter them as unclean things. You will say to them, 'Be gone!'

And he will give rain for the seed with which you sow the ground, and bread, the produce of the ground, which will be rich and plenteous. In that day your livestock will graze in large pastures, and the oxen and the donkeys that work the ground will eat seasoned fodder… Moreover, the light of the moon will be as the light of the sun, and the light of the sun will be sevenfold, as the light of seven days, in the day when the Lord binds up the brokenness of his people, and heals the wounds" (Isaiah 30:18-26). This second passage from Isaiah is, in essence, the answer to the prayer of the ox. And when you think about it carefully, Carmen Gasztold's prayer of the ox is a simpler version of the Lord's Prayer. It is the prayer of utter dependence on God's time, on the desire for God's time, and for God's peace. The last thing the ox asks for is the most blessed thing—"Give me time to think". The main goal of the world is to do anything but let you think, and we pay the price for it. Where there is real thought, there tends to be more peace. The Lord invites you to think on Him, to dream of Him, to contemplate His greatness, His goodness, His truth and glory. For these are our peace, the peace brought to us by the Wonderful Counselor and Prince of Peace, by the one who lay as a baby in the manger by the ox.