The Work of the Sabbath

Easter 6

May 26th, 2019

“Work, in physics, [is a] measure of energy transfer that occurs when an object is moved over a distance by an external force at least part of which is applied in the direction of the displacement” (Britannica.com). There are many ways of calculating work, actually, but that is one of the basic definitions. It is a definition that helps us understand the spiritual message of the miracle we read about today in the Gospel of John (John 5:1-17), when Jesus heals the man who is by the pool of Bethesda. In the following chapter, Jesus says the work of God is to believe: “The work of God is this: to believe in the One He has sent” (John 6:29). The work of God is present in our pericope today—Jesus speaks to the man, telling him to rise, carry his bed, and walk. The external force is the Lord Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit; the object might be the bed or the man who has been lying on it for decades; and the displacement is to walk forward with Jesus. It is not really measurable, and this is possibly a great stretch for an effective analogy, but to me the similarities are striking. The work of the Lord raises us up, carries our burdens, and moves us into the direction of his boundless grace and love. That John is discussing work in the reporting of this miracle seems clear. After the miracle, the narrative continues: “Now that day was the Sabbath. So the Jews said to the man who had been healed, ‘It is the Sabbath, and it is not lawful for you to take up your bed.’ But he answered them, ‘The man who healed me, that man said to me, “Take up your bed, and walk.”’ They asked him, ‘Who is the man who said to you, “Take up your bed and walk”?’ Now the man who had been healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had withdrawn, as there was a crowd in the place. Afterward Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, ‘See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you.’ The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had healed him. And this was why the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because he was doing these things on the Sabbath. But Jesus answered them, ‘My Father is working until now, and I am working’” (John 5:9-17). Our work is to respond to God’s work, and our work is rest. The man now has rest from years of suffering and waiting, rest from his own spiritual restlessness. And yet, this new rest involves work—rising, carrying, walking. In the Gospel of Matthew, when Jesus offers us rest, he still mentions the yoke: “For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28-30). The ox is humble and bears the yoke, and we too must be humble and bear our yoke, but the working yoke of Jesus is gentle; it is not abrasive; it is not cruel. It guides us and makes us productive and fruitful. Everyday work can burn us out and destroy our health. The work of God, however, is rest, healing and refreshment for our souls as we anticipate the great Sabbath God has prepared for us. The miracle that Jesus performs on the man is almost a template or pattern of conversion, spiritual transformation, and service to God. All three require that we rise up, carry our beds, and walk.

Standing or rising up is the first step. In the *lectio divina* tradition, or in classical exegesis, the anagogical reading of Scripture was to guide us upward into the divine life itself: “Anagoge (ἀναγωγή), sometimes spelled anagogy, is a Greek word suggesting a ‘climb’ or ‘ascent’ upwards. The anagogical is a method of mystical or spiritual interpretation of statements or events, especially scriptural exegesis, that detects allusions to the afterlife...Anagoge is that ‘reasoning upwards’ (*sursum ductio*), when, from the visible, the invisible action is disclosed or revealed. The four methods of interpretation point in four different directions: The literal/historical backwards to the past, the allegoric forwards to the future, the tropological downwards to the moral/human, and the anagogic upwards to the spiritual/heavenly” (*Wikipedia*). It seems to me that we often think of the anagogical after we think of the literal or the tropological. In fact, these days we probably just remain with the tropological, regardless of where we are in our Christian beliefs because it is easier to reason about morality and justice, to blame our neighbours and excuse ourselves, to bemoan the state of the world, than it is to think about spiritual realities. Jesus begins with the anagogical, with the heavenly reality—he tells the sick man to rise up. Ἔγειρε! This is the same Greek word used in the Gospel of Luke, when Jesus raises the daughter of Jairus, saying: ““Child, arise” (Luke 8:54). It is the same word the apostle Paul uses in his poem in Ephesians: ““Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you” (Ephesians 5:14). There are many things we need to rise up from—from the depths of our sinfulness, from our unbelief, from the death sentence of mortality, from the inward prison of our fears and desires, from the somnolence and despair of not having the way, the truth and the life in Jesus, the divine life of possessing the presence of the Lord and living in that saving presence. Every human being experiences these things. All have sinned (Romans 3:23), and all will die. All of us have different kinds of frailty, weakness, sadness. All of us have had a time or times when we have not known the Lord or we are living as if we do not know and love the Lord. All of us are imprisoned in narratives of which we imagine we are the main character. Our narratives really only begin when we arise and hear the word of Jesus, when we see that we are not the main characters of our own lives. The Lord Jesus is the main character, and it is wonderful that He is, and that his presence and his word bring true healing. The work of God begins in our lives with the risen Christ raising us with the words he speaks to us: “Arise!”

Once we have arisen, we need to carry our beds. It could just be very simple advice. In our city, or at least in my part of the city, abandoned mattresses are a significant problem. One summer, a local hotel or apartment building decided to illegally distribute a number of them in our back alleys instead of disposing of them properly. Nobody wants your bedbugs. Our sinfulness creates hazards around us, and we should clean up our own mess. It is our responsibility, when we become aware of our weakness, to make things right; James says: “So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin” (James 4:17). Jesus said, “So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift” (Matthew 5:23-24). Real worship can only begin once we have done this. I believe Jesus might have meant something else, though. In our times, we are often taught to let the past go: *to let go and let God.* How can we carry a cross if we cannot carry a mattress? How can we bear one another’s burdens if we have no wish to bear our own from time to time? The apostle Paul says we should: “Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not only in my presence, but now even more in my absence, continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God who works in you to will and to act on behalf of His good pleasure. Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may be blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine as lights in the world as you hold forth the word of life, in order that I may boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor in vain” (Philippians 2:12-16). The early Carthusian monk Guigo II also linked memory to contemplation: “Faith is in the memory” (Guigo II, “Twelve Meditations” in *Ladder of Monks and Twelve Meditations.* Tr. Edmund College, OSA and James Walsh, SJ. Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1979. 121). In the Epistle of James, it says the same: “But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing” (James 1:22-25). We need to remember what God has done for us in the past; we need to remember the words of healing from God and carry them wherever we go. Thus, Paul says: “For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Romans 15:4). Secondly, our memory should be filled with a testimony of thanksgiving. Psalm 107 repeatedly says, “Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wondrous works to the children of man!” (Psalm 107:8, 15, 21, 31-32, 43). We do not let go of our past—we carry it forward to the glory of God and as a light to others to see the steadfast love of the Lord and his wondrous works towards humanity. The mattress that the man is carrying is a symbol of his deliverance and redemption; only he can carry that good news because it was what God did in his narrative. What we carry is our testimony of praise and gratitude.

Lastly, we need to walk. I wonder if the man healed by Jesus ever returned to the Pool of Bethesda again, and if he did—perhaps it was not just to reminisce, but to encourage the others and help them into the water or console them. I do not know. For 38 years, the man had lived the life of an invalid, a life without many events, a life without motion. Jesus hints that his condition might have been the result of sin. Even if he was only an adolescent when this happened, he would be at least in his fifties now, with most of his life having passed him by. And he had watched others in the same condition among the five porticoes, “In these lay many invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed” (John 5:3). Life passed them by. When we are not in the Lord, our lives are passing us by; they are lives of shadows. They have events, they have emotions, they have a semblance of motion—but these also become shadows as death approaches and the lack of meaning or the absence of the divine life clouds the horizon. The divine life is motion, events and relationships flourishing in the grace of God. It is the result of work and service. The work and service of the Lord, and the work and service of the Lord in us as we rise, carry our beds and walk. There are a great number of books on walking. I collect them: *The Philosophy of Walking* by Frederic Gros, *The Old Ways* by Robert Macfarlane, *How to Walk* by Thich Nhat Hanh, *Walking with Plato* by Gary Hayden, all the books by Patrick Leigh Fermor on walking across Europe in the mid-1930s (*A Time of Gifts, Between Woods and Water, The Broken Road*), and my all time favourite book, *The Way of the Pilgrim.* I have not walked enough this past year, but I have walked a fair amount in my life, and I love walking meditation or prayer walking. My father and mother used to complain that I wore out my shoes too much when I was young. One day, my father brought home a pair of industrial strength boots and set them on the table—*he was tired of replacing runners*. I have loved boots ever since, although I do not think recent generations of them are as durable. Whenever I am depressed or need to feel better, I walk. And before long, my back feels better, my spirits rise, my life becomes movement once again in the midst of all the good things the Lord has done, is doing and will do for the world. And I often meet people along the way—some of them help me; I help some of them. Moreover, I pray without ceasing as I walk—because it is good to walk in the light and to know the friendship of God. To walk is to the live the way the Lord has shown us, the way we know that is good—just as we sang in our hymn last week: “He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8). Psalm 116 says, “I will walk before the Lord in the land of the living” (Psalm 116:9). For those in Christ, we are always in the land of the living, we are always on the road to Emmaus, walking alongside our teacher and friend; and we are walking in the paths of the apostles, serving and helping others as they did—teaching, healing, helping, rescuing—all of the works they did because the Lord was with them. As the Apostle Paul said, “we walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7); we “walk by the Spirit” (Galatians 5:16); we “walk in love” (Ephesians 5:2), and we “walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God” (Colossians 1:10).

And this is our work; this is our rest, for it is the work of the Lord, the Lord of the Sabbath, who healed the man on the Sabbath. The Lord Jesus has given us a real life; the Lord Jesus is the main character of history and of our lives. Come, let us rise, carry our beds and walk with the Lord in loving contemplation and loving service.