

'Trinity Sunday – still moving God's way'

Sermon by Mark Pilgrim

Tout Quarry is a visitor attraction on the Isle of Portland in Dorset. Some years ago the quarry was transformed into a sculpture park. Local and nationally recognised sculptors were invited to carve all sorts of things out of the Portland stone available all around. Cropping up all over the places are stone animals and abstract shapes, sculptures of all sorts and sizes.

Unobtrusively carved into a small cliff of Portland stone about 25 feet high is a piece by Sir Anthony Gormley, best known as the creator of the Angel of the North on the A1 near Gateshead. His carving is placed about half way down the small cliff face and is the figure of a man falling. But, because it's a stone carving, he is also perpetually frozen mid-fall. So, it looks like he's moving – but because it's all rock, you know he's not moving. He's both falling ...and going nowhere. The title of the carving is intriguing and it's this: 'Still falling'. 'Still falling' – geddit? Clever, isn't it! First of all, you think 'Yes, that poor man is 'still' as in 'perpetually' falling. And then you think 'Ah, but he's part of the rock – so he's also 'still' as in 'motionless'! He's not falling at all! Each interpretation of 'still' is equally valid. No meaning has precedence over or is more important than another.

Well, something extremely similar is going on in our Gospel passage this morning – and it's all down to the subtleties of the Greek language John wrote in. Last Sunday Kandis alerted us to the different meanings of the Greek word 'paracletos'. She taught us that, while it can mean and does get translated as 'advocate' (which puts us in mind of legal proceedings and someone pleading a case on someone else's behalf), it also – and perhaps more fundamentally – means 'someone who travels by your side...an accompanier'. This week our Gospel passage has another important Greek word (ανωθεν) that can be interpreted – rather as, as we've already seen, 'still' can in English – in significantly different ways. The translation the Church of England invites us to use has Jesus saying to Nicodemus 'No one can see the kingdom of God without being born...' What are the next words? A good number of translations, including the King James version, say 'born again'. But the New Revised Standard Version we use says 'born from above'. That's quite a difference. The value, indeed the necessity, of being 'born again' to enter and experience the kingdom of God has been a key element of belief for many Christians in the Evangelical tradition. Unless you are 'born again' – by which is often meant 'unless you have had a powerful, renewing experience of God's Spirit running all of a sudden through you, enabling and encouraging you to witness that 'Jesus is your Saviour' – then some might say you are not a proper Christian.

But the Greek word 'anowthen' doesn't just mean 'again' or 'a second time'. It also means 'from above'. Just as 'still' in English can mean both 'constantly' and 'motionless', so 'anowthen' in Greek can mean 'again' and 'from above' – and no one meaning can be said to be more important or significant than another.

Did John, the writer of the Gospel, make a mistake? Wouldn't it have been better if he had been clearer and used another phrase which would have conveyed the sense he wanted to communicate without ambiguity – with complete clarity? Aah – but what if John knew exactly what he was doing? What if his use of 'anowthen' was deliberate and intended to be provocative? Why might John have chosen this course?

Last night, Gabrielle and I went to see Ralph Fiennes perform T S Eliot's 'Four Quartets' at the Theatre Royal in Bath. It was a real treat, of course, not only to be going to live theatre but also to see one of the greatest actors of our times live on stage. I don't know how much you know about T S Eliot's 'Four Quartets'. The first thing to say is that it's not a play. It's four long poems, written over a period of some 8 years, shaped into one work. The meaning of its words is not always - or even frequently - clear. The poems are full of ambiguity, of things that could mean this or could mean that. And Eliot took delight in packing his poetry with references to other works of literature, including the Bible, Dante's 'Inferno', Shakespeare and other, more contemporary writers, to provoke more and different associations and questions in his readers minds.

One of the words appearing frequently in Four Quartets to evoke a sense both of ambiguity and wonder in the reader or listener is the little word that's vital to Anthony Gormley's carving in Touts Quarry: 'still'. Like Gormley, T S Eliot juxtaposes stillness and movement. In Four Quartets both stillness and movement reflect and signify God and the divine. Using vocabulary that Sydney Carter took up in his famous hymn, 'Lord of the Dance' Eliot wrote: 'At the still point of the turning world...there the dance is' and 'the light is still at the still point of the turning world'. And, in one of the most arresting images I know of in the English language, Eliot suggests the dynamic stillness of God is like a Chinese jar which 'still moves perpetually in its stillness.' Again and again, he conjures up awe and paradox, wonder and a delicious multiplicity of possibilities in his use of this simple word 'still'. Here's just one more example: trusting that his readers will know St John's Gospel and will associate God with light, he writes 'The light is still at the still point of the turning world'. Here, I suggest, there are three possible meanings or associations for the single word 'still'. That God is solid and unmoving - motionless. Secondly, and subtly differently, that God is steady and unwavering: even if moved, God is not an entity to be thrown off course. And, thirdly, God is constant through time. God is constant in both time and space.

All of this, I suggest, provides us with fertile soil when thinking about this Sunday's theme of the Trinity. Trinity Sunday invites us to celebrate God from three different angles. Whether we use the traditional categories of Father, Son and Holy Spirit or the non-gendered vocabulary of Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, the doctrine of the Trinity is a celebration of complexity and ambiguity. There is always more than one way of experiencing God. There is always more than one way of talking about God. There is always more than one way of witnessing to God and commending God to others.

The question I suggest we could all ask ourselves this Trinity season is 'to what extent are we still with God in our own lives?' The 'still' in that question can be taken in more than one way. It can be seen from the perspective of time and mean 'to what extent are we continually accompanying God - or letting God continually accompany us - on our journey through life?' Are we letting God into our decision making, to our relationships, to our day to day life? And it can be seen from the perspective of motion. To what extent are we 'still' with God? Do we take time to do nothing but be aware of God's presence and seek to bask in God's grace and goodness? Both, I suggest, are equally viable approaches to the one question.

However you find yourself answering the question and musing on the complexity and ambiguity of that one small word 'still', I pray that God the Creator, the Redeemer and the Sustainer will make sure we still move - or fall - God's way for all our days to come. Amen.