

The Joy of Asceticism
Pavel Florensky and Psalm 104
Christchurch Cathedral Evensong
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As a breed theologians are thought to be individuals who are somewhat abstracted from the business of ordinary living, people who have difficulty fitting in with the empirical world of what you can feel, touch taste and see. And when it comes to their range of intellectual pursuits they are generally assumed to be very much on the arts side of the ledger, who feel at home with the humanities, but not the instrumental operational way of thinking that has made it possible for us to change the physical world to our advantage.

Pavel Florensky overrode all these stereotypes. From his childhood in the trans Caucasian region of Tsarist Russia he was entranced by the natural world around him. His parents encouraged him to read widely and deeply in scientific subjects, and tried hard to keep him away from any religious influences. He rapidly made a name for himself in the fields of botany, biology, mathematics, and philosophy, but then confounded the expectations of many by becoming ordained as a priest in the Russian Orthodox Church. Already he had developed a singular view of the physical world – there was no such thing he insisted as inert or dead matter.

In 1914 he produced a major work of theology entitled *The Pillar and Ground of Truth*. Given his reputation as a polymath many picked up the book expecting a multitude of diagrams, logical propositions, and dense, abstract reasoning. To their bewilderment they were confronted by what

appeared to be a series of letters addressed to the Triune God. Take for instance the chapter on the Holy Spirit the Comforter that begins thus:

Do you remember, my gentle one, our long walks in the forest, the forest of dying August...My far and yet eternally near Friend do you remember our intimate conversations? The Holy Spirit and religious antinomies – that, it appears, is what interested us most.

Amongst a number of striking insights on the role of the Holy Spirit in our lives Florensky has one that is particularly useful to us in the season of Lent, one that you might find encouraging if you have brought an element of self-denial into the way you are preparing for Easter. Often we are inclined to grit our teeth as we bend to the particular discipline that we have chosen to accompany our Lenten journey – after all we are Anglicans, and as the Queen tells us in just about every Christmas message, duty is the thing if you are a good person. But supposing we came to think of giving things up for God as something that brought a holy joy with it?

This sermon is entitled *The Joy of Asceticism*, a title as I said to Lynda Patterson, just about guaranteed to halve the congregation at Evensong tonight. Asceticism is a technical term used by spiritual directors to describe the process of stripping and simplification that is essential if we are to progress into any kind of deep faith union with the Christian God. In our fallen state we are prone to certain patterns of obsessional thinking, to various kinds of consoling, deluding fantasies, and to a variety of foolish, corrupting temptations that threaten to bring us down as people of gospel integrity. The traditional spiritual disciplines of fasting, careful selection of

what we read and watch, spiritual reading, regular times of prayer, and a commitment to a stable pattern of life, are the ABC of how to start dealing to our inner confusion of disordered, appetitive desires and what AA calls stinking thinking. These wise disciplines originated in the formative period of Christian monasticism, they are the basic grammar of effective Christian living, and this is why the Church commends some form of self-denial to us in the penitential seasons.

Of course doing something about taking on board these life-giving disciplines requires an act of the will, and some sustained determination. But if that is all it is then we risk having the kind of slavish religion of duty that typified the elder brother in the story of the prodigal son – remember his by-line, “All those years I slaved for you and you never...” The process of stripping and simplification can be a gift of God both in its motivation, in the guiding influence that directs it, and in the fruits of the Spirit that produces it. That is the insight of Pavel Florensky that I offer tonight, and it is the reason for the sermon title, *The Joy of Asceticism*.

He writes of a kind of honeymoon joy that accompanies this sorting out process in our lives. We are after all drawing near to the very source of joy, and we have started on the business of removing the obstacles that blunt and stunt our capacity for feeling. And in a sense we are tuning up a true sensibility that will enable us to register a wider range of affective response. So, while no doubt the going will get tough later on, no wonder at the start of the process of asceticism God may give the gift of what some French feminists call *jouissance*, that joy of heart and radiance of spirit that rejoices

that we have started out on the road to the life that really is life.

Giving up pleasures, reducing the amount of high stimulation rewards for our neural endings, dispensing with the distractions of electronic time wasters, and all the other updates of the Godly disciplines that give life – these are about redirecting our wayward thought patterns and about eroding that false sense of self that distorts the true image of the daughter or son of God that we were born to be. Continue down the road of this Spirit directed asceticism for long enough and you will begin to see the world with new eyes.

And that is where Psalm 104 comes in. It is a hymn of wondering contemplative attention to the creation in all the particularities of its many life forms. God is praised for his generativity in bringing forth both the sublime and the quirky in what makes up the world. Whenever I read this psalm I am reminded of Karl Barth's comments on God's answer to Job. God refuses to give Job a logical, straight down the line, blockbuster answer to the problem of human suffering. Instead he brings the whole of the creation alive before Job's eyes – look at the beauty of what I have made, see the wonder and the glory of it, marvel at all I have brought to pass, is God's answer. The web of life that you are caught up in is something far, far bigger than you can imagine, and its plot lines, and ultimate destination is not something that you can see at present. So the beauty and the sheer scale of the creation is part of the answer.

Notice that before that I spoke of this psalm as a wondering, contemplative attention to the creation. To see the world like that means that you need, to

some extent, to get the self out of it. And that is where asceticism comes in. John of the Cross talked about a re-conversion to creatures. Once you have been through a process of Spirit led purification and illumination you are able to look out on the world with new eyes, seeing it as it really is. When the possessing, anxious, dominating self has been tamed in Christ then we see the world clearly without the filter of me, me, me mental static shutting most of it out. And we come to see that the creation is in the business of praising God all on its own, even when we forgot to say a word of thanks to our creator. The creation has been built with doxological intent. Hear Pavel Florensky on the subject:

The goal of the ascetic's striving is to perceive all of creation in its original triumphant beauty. The Holy Spirit reveals itself in the ability to see the beauty of creation...When I began to pray with my heart, all that surrounded me appeared delightful to me. Trees, grass, birds, earth, air, light, all things seemed to tell me that they exist for man and show God's love for man. And all things pray and sing the glory of God...In other words, all creation was revealed to our pilgrim as an eternal miracle of God, as a living being praying to its Creator and Father.

All very nice you might be thinking – a try harder message for Lent, and a God centred perspective on landscapes – but where does this leave us in the hard spaces of our lives? Well, perhaps we will get some help there when we find out how the story turned out for Pavel Florensky.

Come the Revolution he refused to flee the country, as so many of the Orthodox intelligentsia did, but stayed on to face the music. Soon sacked from his

teaching job at a seminary, he wrote an art history book about icons, and helped the Church to resist the state seizure of its art treasures and icons. Too talented to be left on the sidelines for long, he was brought in to work for the Commission for the electrification of Russia, where he pursued research in physics and electrical engineering. He also invented noncoagulating machine oil, and a symbolic logic machine that some consider a progenitor of the computer. However he did irritate his employers by turning up to work dressed in a cassock. The state showed its displeasure by briefly arresting him in 1928, but he managed to get in another 5 years of useful work before Stalin's growing paranoia saw him sentenced to 10 years corrective labour in Siberia. Even there he pursued scientific research into the permafrost, and ministered to his fellow prisoners in a variety of camps. Eventually the NKVD wearied of him, and shot him by firing squad just outside Leningrad in 1937.

From 1956 on his reputation was slowly rehabilitated, first as a philosopher of language and semiotics, and then in post-communist Russia, as a seminal philosopher and theologian. I like to think of him in the Gulag carrying out scientific research in some ramshackle shed, in between smuggling communion to those who thought the Church could never reach out to them again. Even in the depths of one of the greatest man mad hells of the 20th century he never lost his wondering delight and attention to the natural world, alive as he believed it to be in every part, communicating the praise of God to its creator in a never ending doxological rhythm.