

Sunday 16B 2018

εσπλαγχνισθη

Esplanchnisthê is a splendid word. Whisper it to yourself as you walk in the park, croon it softly as you pet your dog, sing it out somewhere with lots of echo. This is the word St Mark uses in verse 34 of chapter 6, and it describes our Lord's feeling on seeing the crowd, this mass of people who are like a flock without a shepherd. You can translate it in a variety of ways, but it's helpful to look at the associations it has in Greek. It's related to the word *splanchnon*, meaning viscera, innards, intestines, guts. In medicine, your 'splanchnic circulation' describes the blood flow to the abdominal gastrointestinal organs including the stomach, liver, spleen, pancreas, small intestine, and large intestine. I rather think that *splanchna*, at least of animals, would be the sort of things you find in pies. So in English we usually say something like 'Jesus had compassion on the crowd because they were like sheep without a shepherd', but I think it's important and useful to remember that St Mark does use quite a fleshly word here.

Where else is it used? At the beginning of this gospel, when the leper says to Our Lord, 'if you will, you have the power to make me clean.' And in response: 'Jesus was deeply moved with compassion...' It's also what St Luke uses to describe how the father of the prodigal son felt/was moved/reacted when he saw his son afar off and, abandoning his patriarchal dignity, ran towards him, flung his arms around him, and kissed him. In old English we used to talk about the 'bowels of compassion'. And there is one translation of that parable which renders that part like this: '...when he was still far away, his father saw him, and loved him so much that it felt like someone had grabbed a handful of his intestines, and aimed a punch at his belly...' Now, whatever you think of that as a translation of Scripture which you might use in church is neither here nor there: the point is that this is not described to us simply and solely as a process of thought, a matter only for the head. This is a physical, bodily thing. This is enfleshed, incarnate.

And as well as meaning 'innards' in a general sort of way, there are other Greek instances of *splanchnon* having to do with a woman's womb. This is particularly handy because it links us directly to the Old Testament words which have much the same meaning in Hebrew as *splanchna* does in Greek. They also show a link between these innermost parts of the body, and the feeling and showing of compassion, tenderness, mercy; of a deep, deep physical accompaniment to emotion. *Rechem* is the Hebrew word for womb, and it is related to another Hebrew word, *Rachamim*, which we also often translate as 'compassion', 'mercy', and words of that sort. *El male rachamim*, O God full of mercy, is the beginning of a Jewish prayer for the dead. This is very much a quality of God, like beauty, goodness, and truth; 'thou art the same Lord, whose property is always to have mercy.' One Jewish theologian, the nineteenth-century rabbi Samson Hirsch, describes it like this:

Rachamim means more than pity. The word is derived from 'rechem' by which is designated the most self-sacrificing energy of one being for the formation of another being to come into existence and be completed. 'Rechem', the womb, is the hearth of the deepest devotion.

In other words, this physical compassion of God in the Old Testament, which helps us to understand the physical compassion shown by the Son of God in the Gospels, might be understood as the way Our Lady, or any mother, felt about the child whom she carried beneath her heart. It's something which is always active, never passive. It is to be felt as well as contemplated. It is of the body as well as of the soul.

I have gone rather all-out today into his marvellous word, *esplanchnisth *, because – and I suppose it sounds rather simple, really – because I want to help you to see how much God loves you. It is with the same deep, deep compassion that the eyes of the Lord look on the sinner, and the ears of the Lord hear that sinner’s prayer for forgiveness. It’s with that bodily, fleshly compassion that the Lord Jesus gives us his body, his flesh, for our food, for our communion with him. It is with that compassion that the Lord looks on the lowly and raises the poor. It is the compassion which God has, even for you. Didn’t I tell you it was a splendid word?