

SERMON FOR THE EPIPHANY

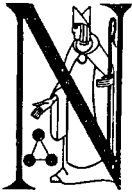
BY

JOHN TAULER, O.P.

Surge illuminare Jerusalem.

Arise, be enlightened, O Jerusalem.

(Isaias 60, 1.)



NOTHING in this world is necessary to God or can rouse his desire. I am mistaken: there is one thing only that God desires ardently. He does everything to obtain it. What he wants is to find in the heart of man a centre always ready, that is to say, void of all else, so that he can accomplish in it and perfect in it his own work. Doubtless he rules with full authority over heaven and earth: nothing can resist his will; yet he seems to knock powerlessly because he is unable to carry out in the soul the work that he so loves and desires.

A question presents itself here. What should the soul do so that God can operate and shine forth in this depth where he finds his delight? What it must do, as the first word of our text points out, is to arise. 'Arise, Jerusalem, and be enlightened'. This shows us clearly that the soul should co-operate to some extent. It should in fact rise up above itself, above all created things, above all that is not God. By this rising up the soul's inmost depth is suddenly seized with ardent desire and through this desire it becomes more and more deprived or stripped of all dissimilarity, that is, of all that is not God. This desire goes on growing and the soul rises above itself, surpasses itself. Not infrequently, through this contact with a heart denuded of all things, this desire penetrates into the flesh and blood and even to the marrow of the bones. Two classes of people can be disposed to this contact or this interior impulse and in two different ways.

(1) Some attain to it by the subtlety of their mind, surrounding themselves with intellectual forms and images, lofty and sublime conceits. Now, while they are engaging themselves in hearing and understanding extraordinary and sublime things, by this very fact they are obstructing their own heart; they are extinguishing in themselves this desire by giving it satisfaction and repose in these wonderful things; they believe at least that, in occupying themselves with these intellectual images, they have found the true Jerusalem, the home of rest and peace. Whilst enjoying this peace they consider themselves true inhabitants of Jerusalem. This peace of their own conception and invention is so good and so delicious that they suppose it can only be found in themselves. Yet it is a mistaken

peace, a false and deceptive peace, as is easily seen by continued attachment to their faults and persistence in their defects. For instance, they are still proud, they delight in bodily and carnal pleasures; they seek the satisfaction of their senses, the charm of conversation; they easily suspect evil; they are full of rash judgment. Easily letting themselves go at every movement of the passions, they are irritable, soon angered and they break out into invectives at the least injury. And how many other faults one could describe!

It is only too evident that in wanting to prepare their inmost hearts in this way and in working themselves up they are hindering the divine activity. Also their peace is an entirely false one; they have not truly *arisen*. They have no right then to take to themselves the name of Jerusalem; they are wrong in presuming that they enjoy true peace. To attain to that, they must struggle relentlessly and with all their strength against their faults, they must walk in Christ's footsteps, applying themselves to copying his example of humility, his works of charity; they must deny themselves, give up all personal advantages. Only on these conditions can they *arise*.

(2) There is another class of souls who are to be admired. They are those who really do arise and who by that very fact are enlightened by God. They leave it to God to prepare their interior souls; they offer themselves to him, they are subject to him without reserve. Having left self and all that concerns it, they have kept nothing back for themselves of the smallest things, nothing in their words, nothing in their thoughts, nothing in their duties, nothing in their duties, nothing of the things they should avoid, in happiness or in adversity, nothing of any kind. But they seek God in everything, their intention is fixed upon him; all that happens to them they receive from him as coming from his hand in humble and loving fear; they refer everything to him with absolute detachment and perfect submission; they abandon themselves to him with spontaneous and joyful resignation, ready to submit to his good pleasure, ready to do all that he wills, as he wills, under all circumstances whether fortunate or adverse, without ever being troubled, without ever losing their peace. They have no other happiness but to do his holy and lovable will in all things. In all truth one can say of them what our Lord said to his disciples when they asked him if he was soon going to celebrate the feast: 'My time is not yet come; but your time is always ready. Go you up to this festival day' (John 7, 68). Indeed, for those of whom we speak, the time is always favourable. But what is this time? It is the time when adversity is patiently endured, when we are resigned. This time is always present. As to God's time, when he deigns or not to act or to enlighten us,

that time has not always come. Again, these souls leave themselves at God's free disposal, resigned to wait with unalterable patience.

These last differ from those of whom we were speaking above in that they do not prepare their own interior but leave to God the care of doing so. Of course, like everyone else, they experience first movements of vice from which no one is exempt; but when these passions present themselves and attack them, such as pride, carnal pleasure, the attractiveness of temporal goods, anger, hatred, or any other feelings of that kind, they are distressed, and directly after the first attack they turn back to God, referring themselves again to his good pleasure; they patiently endure all that goes against the grain, they offer themselves to God, resigned to suffering. This is how they really *arise*, getting above themselves and all other things. This is how they become true citizens of Jerusalem, enjoying peace in the midst of trial, happiness in the midst of adversity. What pleases them above everything else is God's most desirable will. This is why the whole world cannot take their peace from them. Why, all the demons, all men would rise up against them in vain, they could not disturb in the slightest the peace that they are enjoying. They are tasting God alone and whatever in creatures is not God seems to them insipid. And so in all truth they are enlightened. Indeed God is always shining through them, he enlightens them effectively with his pure light in every circumstance; they see more clearly in the depths of darkness than others see in the brightest light. I would say therefore and incessantly repeat that these people are the more tender, refined, lovable, why even supernatural and divine, as they cease to do any of their actions outside God. Yes indeed, if one may so express it, they no longer exist; God alone exists within them. They are as amiable as any one can well be; the whole universe rests upon their shoulders; they are the most solid pillars of Holy Church. To have arrived at this stage is to have found an immense happiness and unparalleled joy.

But again these two categories of people differ from each other in that the first while labouring to prepare their interior themselves without leaving this care to God, remain attached to their faults in such a way as never completely to overcome them, because they always want to put into the work something of their own and take satisfaction in the efforts and the results of their own will. On the contrary, those admirable souls whose resignation is perfect and who leave to God the care of preparing their hearts are raised up above all vestige of self. When attacks come from their passions they immediately take refuge in God, taking with them all their miseries and there sharing in a certain way in the divine liberty they lose no time in being delivered from their imperfections.

Now here another question presents itself. Ought these people, while God is putting their own souls in order, to do anything themselves exteriorly? In other words, are they necessarily obliged to be co-operating with God? The text of our sermon certainly says they are to rise up and this seems to point to some activity.

Yes, certainly that is a work that is always incumbent upon them and that they must never omit as long as they are in this mortal life united to a body. What does that mean? They must never leave off as if the end of their progress had been achieved. Whatever summit of perfection they have attained, there is always another and a higher that they must force themselves to climb. Let their souls always be fixed on God; let them be ever trying to despoil and empty their hearts so as to make them more free; let them at all times, with the three Magi, seek the new-born King, ceaselessly asking, 'Ubi est qui natus est? Where is he that is just born?' And all this with a humble and loving awe while remaining interiorly attentive to what God requires of them or desires them to do. For instance, if God wants us to be passive, let us remain passive; if he wants us to act, then let us act; if he wants us to enjoy holy contemplation in a state of repose, then let us keep in repose.

The inmost soul of such a one is its own witness that it has been prepared, purified by God. This inmost heart God desires to occupy entirely and he forbids the entry to all creatures for any reason at all. Now, God works in the depths of the soul either through intermediaries as with those of whom we were speaking just now, or without intermediary as with these latter, the most favoured by far. What is he doing in the heart, directly or immediately. We cannot say: it is impossible to gather from this thing or from that. He alone can know who has experienced it; but yet he is incapable of expressing it to another. When God has truly taken possession of this interior centre, all exterior works to which we are attached bit by bit fall away. On the other hand the interior contemplation of God goes on from day to day developing more and more.

Finally when after great efforts and especially with the grace of God these persons have attained the summit of perfection (attainable by a human creature) then they should sacrifice themselves entirely and believe themselves to be sheer nothingness, according to that saying of our Lord's, 'When you shall have done all these things that are commanded you, say: "We are unprofitable servants; we have done that which we ought to do"' (Luke, 17, 10). Never can one presume too much on one's state of perfection, never can one be perfect enough, even at the pinnacle of perfection, to consider oneself dispensed from trembling and being humble.

Always must we say in our hearts: 'Lord, thy will be done!' Always must we exercise stern watchfulness over ourselves and ask ourselves if we are not letting our affections dwell upon creatures, if something is not stealing into our hearts that might offend God and be an obstacle to the marvellous and sovereign work that he wants to accomplish in this interior without any sort of intermediary.

May the divine clemency grant that all of us may arise in this way, so that God can accomplish within us his illuminating work. Amen.



FROM ST AUGUSTINE

'Annorum aeternorum memor fui. Qui sunt anni aeterni? Magna Cogitatio. Videte si vult ista cogitatio nisi magnum silentium. Ab omni forinsecus strepitu, ab omni rerum humanarum tumultu intus requiescat, qui cogitare vult annos istos aeternos.'

Enarr. in Ps. LXXVI, 8.

ETERNITY

Within those shrouding syllables there lies
 Measureless meaning, many-veiled mysteries.
 The frail antennae of the human mind,
 With feeble waverings search the void to find
 Some resting place, whereon to build belief
 In Being unimpaired, beyond this brief
 Glint of existence.

Far from all worldly din,
 That deafens the Spirit listener within,
 Down in deep wells of silence must he sink,
 Who dares to think
 Upon Eternity.

JOHN SEARLE.