

Nothing drops entire, whole and unmediated from the heavens – or from the seat of inspiration or from the angel of the Lord, or from anywhere else for that matter. Everything that comes into the mind and heart, from a poem to a gospel, is mediated through the prism of the human personality. It cannot be otherwise because we cannot step outside of our humanity... and heaven or inspiration or the angel of the Lord has to use us as we are. There is a kind of functional cooperation.

The great Italian artist Caravaggio once painted a commissioned portrait of St Matthew writing his gospel: the evangelist is depicted sitting cross-legged on a chair, an open book on his knees, staring vacantly into the fore-distance, as if somehow he wasn't actually conscious. Leaning over him on his left is a small young angel, her hand physically guiding the hand of St Matthew on the page. It looks as if the angel herself is writing the gospel. This commission was rejected because it turned the evangelist into an unthinking, robotic instrument. And this is not what inspiration – divine or otherwise – is about.

Which brings me to the first thing I feel I want to say about today's second reading from the letter of St Paul to the Galatians: the prism of his personality. In almost everything he says, he is surely speaking chiefly about himself. We know he was a conflicted man, torn between virtue and vice; he tells us this himself in his letter to the Romans:

“For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing.” (7:9)

We could probably all say exactly the same thing – I certainly could. So, in today's second reading, he is bemoaning all the temptations that he is beset with. We must also assume that the Galatians were living lives of self-indulgence – fornicating, quarrelling, behaving indecently, getting drunk and having orgies. Otherwise, why

would he need to tell them not to? Human nature doesn't change very much, I guess. When Paul uses the phrase 'If you are led by the Spirit, no law can touch you' he means living a life *directed* by the Spirit – which today descended upon Mary and the Apostles in the form of tongues of fire – a life of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control. Obviously if we possessed all of those virtues perfectly and permanently, we would be unbearable to everybody else. What St Paul means is when we take a good look at how we conduct ourselves in our daily lives, we will get a fair idea of whether we are 'living in the Spirit' – or not. It's an ongoing self-examination that most of us, most of the time, discreetly avoid. Probably with good reason.

When Paul says: 'No law can touch you', he is talking about the Jewish law: there were 613 regulations and laws (called *mitzvot*) in the Law of Moses (the *Torah*) and if a pious Jew kept them all to the letter all his life, he would be saved; but since no human being could possibly keep them all to the letter all the time, the law is unable to save anyone. And we remember that for many years, as a Pharisee, St Paul prided himself on his study of and dedication to the law. However, throughout all his letters, he makes it quite clear that it is only faith in Jesus Christ that saves. And people being what they are, the Galatians, believing that no law could touch them, had a very enjoyable time breaking as many of them as they could. This is exactly why Paul had to remind them that although the Spirit put them beyond the law, it certainly did not put them beyond the need to live a good, holy and loving life in peace and harmony with others.

All this is the background to today's second reading. Galatia was an ancient area north of Anatolia, corresponding to Ankara in modern Turkey, and the message to all his Christian converts there, is a variation on a favourite theme of Paul's: the Spirit versus the flesh. Whenever he plays any of the variations on this theme, if we are to be

able to sing along with it, we have to know what he means by 'flesh'. He uses two Greek words: *soma*, which means 'body' and *sarx*, which means 'flesh'. *Sarx* can be the actual physical substance of a body, either human or animal; or a physical union between two bodies (as in 'the two shall become one flesh'); or the 'inferior' part of human nature, which is as weak as the spirit is willing; or the characteristics of created life that we all share - pain, suffering, impermanence, mortality; or again, the inclination of the human person to commit sin. Obviously, this last meaning is what he is talking about when he urges the Galatians to avoid fornication, gross indecency, drunkenness and all the rest. *Soma* is simply the physical body but, sometimes confusingly, Paul uses the two words interchangeably. So *soma* is what we are – heads, arms and legs, stomachs and feet, and all the rest; it is our means of living this life, it gives us the delight and joy of the senses, from acts of love, through the pleasures of the table, to the appreciation of art and music. *Sarx* is who we are – who we show ourselves to be – in our everyday behaviour.

By and large, over the centuries, the Church has been very unkind to the poor old body, regarding it as a regrettable necessity, a source of temptation and sin and of far less significance than the soul. There have been saner voices, though: the medieval mystic Julian of Norwich, who wrote the famous text *Revelations of Divine Love*, was adamant that God's glory dwells also in our bodies. This was completely contrary to the spirit of her age, which derided the body, encouraged bodily penance and generally held it in contempt. However, in Chapter 6 of her *Revelations*, Julian is speaking of the goodness of God, and she gives an example of how that goodness is active in our lives; she wants to show how good God is. What example does she choose? Love? A rainbow or a dove? The beauty of the earth or the glory of the heavens...? No, none of these things. As an example

of God's goodness, she chooses a bowel movement – going to the toilet. She says:

“For God does not despise what he has created, and he does not hold back from serving us, even in our lowest natural bodily need. (...) A person walks upright and the food in their body is sealed up as in a beautiful purse; and when their time of necessity comes, it opens and then it closes again, all simply and honestly. And this, I tell you, is due to the goodness of God.”

Only the Holy Spirit, whose coming we celebrate again this Pentecost, could possibly have taught her that.

The Holy Spirit *infused* Mary and the Apostles at Pentecost: he entered their souls, which were incarnate in flesh; in other words, the flesh served the purposes of the Spirit, and this is what St Paul is trying to teach the Galatians. At one point in his letter he cries out in exasperation:

“Oh foolish Galatians! (...) Are you so stupid that having begun life in the Spirit, you now think to bring it to perfection in the flesh?” (3: 1,3).

The body is the visibility of the soul: it is the soul made visible in concrete form. Its most elevated task is to express the will of our inner self. If it is our wish to put an irritating person in their place, we need a tongue and a mouth to do it; if we want to commit some act of violence upon another, we need our hands to do it; and if we care to indulge in illicit pleasures, we need a body for that. And then we make ourselves as foolish as the Galatians. On the other hand, if we wish to be friendly to another person, we need lips to smile and eyes to crinkle; if we are inspired to feed the hungry or shelter the homeless – or engage in *any* act of loving kindness – we need our body. In other words, our body can do good things or bad things according to how it is directed by the soul. In this sense, the body can ‘redeem’ the soul and ‘sanctify’ it, if the soul wills it to do that which is good and true.

This is at the heart of the Pentecost message. The Holy Spirit does not disdain or reject the flesh: he uses it to fill us with his fruits, which St Paul lists in today's second reading. Here's a little exercise to teach us something about ourselves: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control – if you could have only one of these, what would it be?