*Love to the loveless shown that they might lovely be.*

Tonight’s liturgy presents us with a series of readings from the Holy Scriptures that celebrate our transformation from slavery into the freedom of life. They centre around the liberation of God’s chosen people from captivity in Egypt, which is an allegory for our release from death, and we are invited to renew our confession of faith in Jesus Christ that made us part of the pilgrim Church.

The pilgrim life is not an aimless meandering with no sense of purpose, and nowhere in Christian literature is this more lyrically explored in detail than in Dante’s allegorical poem The Divine Comedy. It’s a monumental work that builds on the eagerness of the earliest Christian teachers to use allegory as a way of explaining the reality of truth revealed in Jesus Christ and thereby dispelling the shadow of pagan myths.

So, for example, the pagan story of Orpheus going to the underworld to claim his love, Euridice is re-worked as Christian allegory to illustrate the descent of Jesus into hell where, because he is God and man, and has defeated death by his cross, he is able to release the souls that are held captive there.

The Christian allegories also recognise that we are driven by the desire of love. For Dante, Beatrice was the embodiment of the divine love which he had always admired in her from afar. In response to her death in 1290 his epic poem is a meditation on the soul’s search for the source of love that is authentic and eternal. Dante was searching for what the novelist and theologian, Dorothy Sayers describes as “the eternal Beauty shining through the created beauty, *the reality of Beatrice as God knew her*” (my italics).[[1]](#footnote-1)

When, at last, at last, Dante and Beatrice meet, the words she speaks to him are astonishing in their brevity: “Look on us well; we are indeed, we are/Beatrice”. And who is that? “She is the Sacrament of the Body, she is divine Theology, she is the vehicle of Grace, she is the Body of Christ in the Church” is the answer Dorothy Sayers gives us, that’s who Beatrice is. And she is all these things by virtue of her baptism.

Tonight we come to remind ourselves that we are also all these things. Your body has sacramental character because it’s what you were baptised in, the same flesh and blood that God took to himself in Jesus Christ as the material for the work of our redemption. Tonight we are all theologians, asserting that theology is not some subject on a syllabus: it is the articulation of your knowledge of God in the offering of worship – in short the saying of your prayers. And by virtue of the practice of your baptism you are the body of Christ, the Church – not its entirety, but a complete manifestation of its life.

The location of these perceptions in a work of allegorical poetry reminds us that Christian truth is performed, lived, and forged in the God-given media of art, music, drama, study and poetry which are the tools of worship. And in those media the truth of revelation can also be exact and consistent. As Dorothy Sayers so refreshingly declares, “Christian faith binds the [pagan] legends of dead-and-risen deities to a place and date: “suffered under Pontius Pilate…and the third day rose again.” And the Christian faith is specific, not vague: “*This* man [Jesus Christ] was very God. On the pivot of that singularity the whole Christian interpretation of phenomena uncompromisingly turns.” *What confidence in the faith – do not argue with her!*

This man, Jesus Christ, was very God. Only so, could he show us love that would transform us into itself. Only so, driven by love, could he search for us and reveal in us our true selves.

The icons of the resurrection, used in Orthodox worship and devotion, show us Jesus, standing on the broken gates of the underworld, hauling into light and freedom the generations of the past. As he draws them to himself, he calls by name the prophets who foretold his birth, the patriarchs who shaped a chosen people marked out by covenant, and he is recognised by all the ancient lovers of wisdom, right back to Adam and Eve, whom he embraces as they see in him a likeness to themselves. And finally, according to tradition, he goes in search of Judas who betrayed him and whom he loved. And in the joy and power of his risen life Jesus grasps his fallen friend, for he sees Judas as God sees him, as one to whom love is shown that even he might lovely be.

So as we come to be renewed in the faith of our baptism in this celebration of paschal joy, may Jesus Christ, the Priest and Shepherd of our souls, grasp, liberate and transform us, so that in the light of everlasting day we might be lovely in his sight.

1. The Divine Commedy: III Paradise, trans. Dorothy Sayers (Penguin 1962) p.16 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)