

εὐαγγελίστες

EVANGELIST

Talk on the first evening, after supper, before Compline

Ἀρχὴ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ - *The Beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ*. This is the first verse of the first Greek Gospel, and I recall it at the head of our retreat, hoping to give the flavour of it to everything which follows. I plan to burden you with five talks, which mark the five days of the retreat as laid down for you by the canons; each one will take up a word which is used of the Diaconate. We shall try to build our thinking and praying around these words, and each will have a relationship to Scripture, Liturgy, and the Story of the Church – all areas in which you have become expert in the last three years. I should like to suggest that the first day of your retreat, which is nearing its end, has taken as its form a kind of pilgrimage. And at the end of the pilgrimage, you have found your way to Good News, and to the word for the day - εὐαγγελίστες, a bringer of the Gospel.

Let us examine the places where this word, and its relatives, occur in the New Testament, and the meaning we find there.

The root of the word is the word ἄγγελος, *angel* – which occurs 176 times in the New Testament. It means *messenger*. St Gregory the Great tells us:

It must be realized that the word *angel* is the name of an office, and not of a nature. These holy spirits of our homeland in heaven are always spirits, but in no way can they always be called *angels*, or *messengers*, since they are angels only when something is announced through them. Those who make minor announcements are called *angels*, those who make important ones are called *archangels*.

The addition of the prefix εὐ- makes the messenger a carrier of *good* news; and this gives us our word “evangelist”; there is an important verb, εὐαγγελισθαί, “to proclaim good news”, and there is the noun which is one of Paul’s favourite words, εὐαγγέλιον: “Gospel”.

We have the Hebrew word *BSR* which the Greek New Testament translates by our word: it may not surprise us to find it in the familiar phrase of Deutero-Isaiah (52:7):

How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of the messenger announcing peace, of *the messenger of good news*, who proclaims salvation, and says to Zion: *Your God is king!*

The Book of Consolation makes extensive use of our word: and so does Trito-Isaiah, in phrases like (60:6):

Everyone in Saba will come bearing gold and incense, and *proclaiming the praise* of the Lord

We even find Jesus applying the word to himself in Isaiah 61:1, his textual choice for his messianic first sermon at Nazara in Luke's Gospel:

The spirit of the Lord has been given to me, for the Lord has anointed me: he has sent me *to bring good news* to the afflicted, to soothe the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to captives, release for those in prison, to proclaim a year of favour from the Lord

We say it every morning in our first Psalm, 94: 1:

Come *ring out our joy* to the Lord, hail the Rock of our salvation!

The news which is really joyous in the Old Testament is the news of the end-times, the eschatological message that God is about to arise, to scatter his enemies, and to inaugurate the kingdom of peace. This theme appeals to Luke, the evangelist who commences his Gospel with a long series of joyous annunciations, encounters, and paeans of praise at the advent of salvation, the opening of messianic days: the commerce of angels with Zechariah in the Temple, and Mary in her house, the appearance of the angelic choir at the birth of Jesus, the constant description of joy at the birth of John and at the visitation of Mary to Elizabeth, and the proclaimed Canticles in which the cast constantly praise God, giving us the *Benedictus*, the *Magnificat*, the *Gloria in Excelsis*, and the *Nunc Dimittis*. Notice – these things are the heart of the church's office-book, with which we are enjoying so privileged an encounter in the life of the Abbey this week. The message is clear: that the Church intends that you should take on your lips every day, several times a day, these ecstatic *proclamations* of the joy of the Gospel, in season and out of season:

It is good to give thanks to the Lord, to make music to your name, O Most high; *to proclaim* your love in the morning, and your truth in the watches of the night.

The Lucan Acts of the Apostles also describes angels, like the one which comes into Peter's cell to strike off his shackles and open the gates. In one place we are told that, as he prepared to proclaim the Gospel to them,

The members of the Sanhedrin all looked intently at Stephen, and his face appeared to them like the face of an angel.

The image of this Deacon, "whose face appeared like the face of an angel", should stay with you. You will not now be consulting the mirror: remember Gregory's words, that the title "angel" refers to an office, not a nature, and you will not forget the true meaning of εὐαγγελιον. You have got to be the *habitual, perennial* herald of good news. You will be reminded of this every time you recite the Office.

It is the approach of Paul to this concept of the Gospel that I want to focus on in this meditation. Firstly, we ought to notice that the word has already become a fixed concept, both for him and for his readers. It means, not simply the act of proclamation (as when he refers back to "the early days of the gospel" (Phil 4:15) meaning the early days of his preaching) but also the content of the message (1Cor 9:14): "The Lord gave me the instruction that those who preach the gospel should get their living from the gospel." But Paul's use of the word habitually recalls our opening phrase: *the Good News of Jesus Christ*. When he spells it out, it is the news of the eternal Son becoming Man, of his being the expected Davidic Messiah, and of his exaltation as κυριος to the right hand of the Father – a destination which comes about by his passion and the death on the Cross. The gospel brings peace (Eph 6:14ff):

So stand your ground, with truth a belt round your waist, and uprightness a breastplate, wearing for shoes on your feet *the eagerness to spread the Gospel of peace*, and always carrying the shield of faith so that you can use it to quench the burning arrows of the Evil One. And then you must take salvation as your helmet and the sword of the Spirit, that is, the Word of God.

but those who refuse to listen may not expect to escape scrutiny (Rom 2:16)

on the day when, *according to the gospel I preach*, God, through Jesus Christ, judges all human secrets.

Paul knows that the Gospel is the fulfilment of all the promises of God: and we have studied carefully the great sentences at the beginning of the Letter to the Romans:

From Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for *the gospel that God promised long ago* through his prophets in the holy scriptures.

This is the gospel about his Son who, according to human nature, was born a descendant of David; and who, in terms of the Spirit and of holiness, was designated Son of God in power by resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.

If you want to sum up the gospel in one word, the word has to be *Christ*. I want to read to you the first chapter of the letter to the Philippians, where you will hear Paul, in the thick of his ministry, musing on the multitudinous concerns and anxieties that he has. They are enough to divide the strongest of minds: it is the overarching power of the one thing that drives him – the Gospel – that enables him to have peace, and to enjoy a sense of complete integrity despite his worries.

Philippians 1

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all God's holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with their presiding elders and the deacons. Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I thank my God whenever I think of you, and every time I pray for you all, I always pray with joy for *your partnership in the gospel* from the very first day up to the present. I am quite confident that the One who began the good work in you will go on completing it until the Day of Jesus Christ comes. It is only right that I should feel like this towards you all, because you have a place in my heart, since you have all shared together in the grace that has been mine: both my chains, and *my work defending and establishing the gospel*. For God will testify for me how much I long for you all with the warm longing of Christ Jesus. It is my prayer for you that your love for one another may grow more and more, with *the knowledge and complete understanding that will help you to reach true discernment*, so that you will be innocent and free from any trace of guilt when the Day of Christ comes, entirely filled with the fruits of uprightness through Jesus Christ, for the glory and praise of God.

Now I want you to realize, brothers, that the circumstances of my present life are helping rather than hindering *the advance of the gospel*. My chains in Christ have become known not only to all the Praetorium, but to everybody else; and so most of the brothers in the Lord have gained confidence from my chains, and are getting more and more daring in *announcing the Message without any fear*. It is true that some of them are *preaching Christ* out of malice and rivalry; but there are many, as well, whose intentions are good. Some are doing it out of love, knowing that I remain firm in *my defence of the gospel*. There are others who are *proclaiming Christ* out of jealousy, not in sincerity, but meaning to add to the weight of my chains. But what does it matter? Only that in both ways, whether with false motives or true, *Christ is proclaimed*, and for that I am happy; and I shall go on being happy too, because I know that this is what will save me, with your prayers and with the support of the Spirit of Jesus Christ; all in accordance with my most confident hope and trust that I shall never have to admit defeat, but with complete fearlessness I shall go on, so that, now as always, *Christ will be glorified in my body, whether by my life or by my death*. Life to me, of course, is Christ, but then death would be a positive gain. On the other hand again, if to be alive in the body gives me an opportunity for *fruitful work*, I do not know which I should choose. I am caught in this dilemma: I want to be gone and to be with Christ, and this is by far the stronger desire; yet for your sake to stay alive in this body is a more urgent need. This much I know for certain: that I shall stay and stand by you all, to encourage your advance and joy in the faith, so that my return to be among you may increase to overflowing your pride in Jesus Christ on my account.

But you must always *behave in a way that is worthy of the gospel of Christ*, so that whether I come to you and see for myself, or only hear all about you from a distance, I shall find that you are *standing firm and united in spirit, battling, as a team with a single aim, for the faith of the gospel*, undismayed by any of your opponents. This will be a clear sign: for them, that they are to be lost, and for you, that you are to be saved. This comes from God, for you have been granted the privilege for Christ's sake, not only of *believing* in him, but of *suffering* for him as well; you are *fighting* the same battle which you saw me fighting for him, and which you hear I am fighting still.

Here is an apostle in prison, surrounded by intrigue even within the church, and divided in mind as to his future, still integrating everything within him under the one heading of proclamation, his role as the bringer of good news. How can we understand this?

I would ask you to watch Paul's use of the phrase *in Christ*. Notice how he uses the phrase, or the idea that it represents, *especially when he speaks of his most personal experiences*: whenever he is speaking of the things that truly approach most closely to his true heart, he mentions his intimacy with Christ, his being continually found in Christ, his constant referring of his experiences to Christ. In the first chapter of Philippians, he cannot mention the community without remembering that they are *in Christ*. He longs for them from afar, but *with the warm longing of*

Christ Jesus; he prays they find their struggling way to complete goodness, but always *through Jesus Christ*.

He speaks of his own situation in the same way: he is chained, but they are *chains in Christ*, and the brothers who are inspired by them are no ordinary friends, but *brothers in Christ*. His fate in the body does not matter: because, living or dying, he is sure of *glorifying Christ* by it. He knows that the Philippians will watch and understand what happens to him, and that they will be proud of him: but it will be, not an ordinary partisan human emotion, but *pride in Jesus Christ on my account*. He encourages them to think that, as they have the privilege of believing *in Christ*, they have the superadded gifts of being allowed to *suffer in Christ* and to *fight in Christ*, which makes even the most confused and negative realities into modes of sharing *in Christ*.

Perhaps it will be a good idea, when we read St Paul in future, not to let this small phrase – *in Christ* - hurtle past without touching us. I am sure that his use of it actually carries the absolute heart of his meaning every time it arises. We should make sure that we reap the fruit of this insight, so that our experiences can *all* contribute to our ability to proclaim the gospel, *in the morning*, and *in the watches of the night*.