

OXHERDING AND THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Sermon preached at 11.00am Sung Eucharist
St. Edmundsbury Cathedral
Sunday before Lent
Sunday 14 February 2021

Today is the third day of Chinese New Year. In other countries that's lunar New Year. It's estimated over 2 billion people celebrate this festival which is a quarter of the world's population. Amongst them millions of Christians in China, around the world and Chinese congregations here in Britain. The Year of the Ox has begun.

At the same time it's Ash Wednesday this week and we are about to start Lent once more. It's a season to reflect on our journey of faith. That spiritual journey is depicted in different ways in different cultures. We talk about Pilgrims Progress. You may have heard of Teresa of Avila's Interior Castle or the soul's mystical marriage to God from medieval Christian mysticism.

In Chinese religion there is a series of pictures called the ox herding pictures. They depict a young oxherder on a quest to tame, train, and transform her heart and mind, represented by subduing an ox. I'm going to show you these ox herder pictures, with a Christian interpretation. They are Zen in origin, but known by many Asian Christians. Learning about other traditions helps us to see our own beliefs in a new light. I'll show you eight of the ten. You can look them up later if you want to discover more. They are small, simple, Chinese ink images. Just one person in a rural setting.

There are many versions of the ox herding pictures by different artists. These can be easily found on the internet. For example, Master Jikihara from the collection of Zen Mountain Monastery.

In the first picture the young oxherder is searching. She looks a little lost. She has questions about the meaning and purpose of life. Possessions bring comfort but they don't satisfy her deeper longings and hopes. Perhaps recent experience has made her question what life is about. Unemployment. Sickness. Bereavement. Pandemic? She is searching for something deeper. Contentment. Inner peace.

In the second picture the oxherder finds some tracks on the ground, the footprints of an ox. The ox herder realises there is an ox to be found. We can do something about our dissatisfaction. She has heard some wisdom spoken. She has seen a few people focus their lives on spiritual things, on faith. So a sense of hope. Christ is calling.

"Will we ever find ourselves, know ourselves, discover the truth, be at one with God and life?"¹ In the third picture the oxherder finds the ox, half hidden in the bushes. Perhaps in the signs of Spring we sense a oneness with Creation. A glimpse that we are connected to the Source of Life. Something clicks inside the oxherder and she knows what she must do. She must make a commitment to faith, to exploring the spiritual life. This is how peace can be reached.

In the fourth picture the oxherder catches the ox with a rope. But the ox resists. This is a testing time. We believe the ox can be tamed, but it demands more struggle and more strength than we could possibly have imagined. There is tension and struggle between our spiritual aspirations and longings, and our appetites, our desires, our ego. For so many years we have fed our appetites, we have cultivated unspiritual habits, making them strong and resistant to being tamed. The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. Our emotional and psychological baggage is heavy and strong. We need the determination and discipline of Lent.

¹ Paul Clasper (former Dean of Hong Kong) in "The Ox-Herder Pictures. Zen Buddhism's Version of The Pilgrim's Progress"

In the fifth picture the ox is no longer wild but follows the oxherder. The ox herder holds the rope loosely but is still vigilant in case the ox pulls suddenly away. At this stage we are familiar with the spiritual life, we pray regularly and practice our faith. We know God in our lives, but we still need determination and discipline as the powers of distractions are strong. We need to be firm with ourselves, knowing how easily we can be diverted from our quest. But we need, equally, to be gentle with ourselves and keep the rope loose.

In the next picture the oxherder rides on the ox. She has grown in the spiritual life and now sits comfortably and relaxed. They are one, united. The struggle is over. The oxherder plays her flute as she rides the ox. There is peace which passes all understanding. Discipline and duty have faded away, replaced by deep joy, creativity, life.

In the next two pictures, there is no ox anymore. They are images of union, oneness. The seventh picture shows the oxherder is at home, at peace, restful. Awareness of God becomes as natural as breathing. We are at peace with ourselves, our mind, body, and heart, with the whole world.

In the eighth picture, there is just a simple circle. Transfiguration has occurred. The ox and the oxherder have both gone. There is no distinction, no separation from reality. There is a union with God. There is total emptiness, which is total fullness. There is a parallel with the Transfiguration of Jesus. The disciples see that mystical vision of the fullness of Jesus united with heaven. Ox and oxherder are replaced with the simple circle. We have passed from “much of self and some of God” through “less of self and more of God” and reached “none of self and all of God”. “Death of the small is the way to fullness of life. Only by losing life is [life in all its fullness] to be found.”²

The spiritual journey is mysterious. We cannot control it because it is in God’s hands. Dear friends, with this long lockdown, it may feel like you’ve been living with Lent deprivation for weeks already. Like an enforced retreat. Its not fun to live like enclosed monastics and isolated hermits when you haven’t chosen that life. The days blur into one. But take heart. Spiritual growth is always possible. In fact it rarely comes without challenge. God is always calling us into deeper union and further transfiguration.

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² Paul Clasper ibid