

On the Idea of Returning

During Lent we hear a lot about returning, that is, where we stand in relationship to God. Implied is that somewhere, somehow we got off the beaten path and need to get back on it. The liturgy for this season is designed to make us feel a marked difference between where we are now compared with where we should be even if we haven't moved an inch. Our awareness of distance thus has become keener even though physical extension isn't involved. However, this awareness can spill over into our relationships with people. Such is part of feeling isolated which afflicts so many people in this era of Covid 10.

The most frequently used term as how to overcome this gap is the Greek verb *metanoeo* usually translated as to repent and the more familiar noun derived from it, *metanoia* or repentance. The message pretty much permeates the Church's entire mission which leans more to proclaiming it instead of preaching it though the latter certainly ties in with her overall vocation. The season of Advent also speaks of returning to the Lord but not as intensely as during Lent. In Advent the Lord comes to us whereas in Lent it's the other way around. We could say that the drama *metanoeo* works itself out between these two poles of Christ having come and we going to him. We could also throw in that once Christ has come he more or less hangs around waiting for us to go to him. Looking at in this way, it seems, is refreshing and takes the prospect of sustaining a heavy load off our shoulders.

Such frequent emphasis on returning to the Lord during Lent implies that we've been going in a direction opposite to the one we're supposed to be on. This doesn't mean we're engaged in a preconceived, constant deviation but an overall awareness that we're not going as straight ahead as we'd like. We move along the same track which we feel is taking on an increasing downward direction. The problem boils down to a matter of how to head in the right direction. So what brings about this awareness? First, we know for sure that movement is involved, one which we've set in motion perhaps unintentionally but now find ourselves unable to control. The direction in which this movement is headed comes second and is more important. It's marked by a growing sense of dissatisfaction with ourselves and that we're in need for a course correction.

Since we're traveling on the same track, rectifying the situation seems relatively easy. It's simply a matter of putting our gears in reverse. However, more is involved than at first glance. First we have to bring ourselves to a complete stop. Only then is

a return possible. If we don't stop or better, slow down gradually instead of slamming on the breaks, our gears will be thrown out of place. We end up stalled in the middle of nowhere with little chance of rescue.

At this point it's good to take advantage of having come to a halt, unexpectedly as just said, for it gives time to assess the situation. One thing becomes apparent, very much so. To remain stationary means we sink due to our own weight. We have to stay in motion which means either we continue ahead or go back. To go forward is asking for the same trouble as standing still. We think that staying in motion is better than idling in place, but it's just as bad if not worse. If we went ahead with our original intent, quickly we'd suffer another stop, this one worse than the first. Because any prospect of moving forward is out of the question, we're left with one option open, return.

The idea of returning strikes us initially as abhorrent. It means abandoning our plans and passing through territory already covered and familiar to us. We know the drill or think we do until we actually set out on this return. At first you'd think going over territory we've seen before would make the trip easier. The opposite turns out to be true. You have to re-interpret stuff you've transversed, a task wholly other than the one we had set out upon. Thus we end up with double the work. Indeed, the whole enterprise is discouraging. We look at the same old scenery as when we had set out. Knowing what's around the next corner makes the journey seem unnecessarily long which in fact it is.

Such is one side of this return or *metanoia*. Tied in with it is the idea of sin. It has become part and parcel of the Christian tradition, so much so that once we've heard of it, we turn it off our radar because it's the same ol' same ol'. Depressing, to be sure, which is why a lot of people aren't moved when they hear of it as had been in the past. This has nothing to do with the reality of sin...not the issue here...but how it's presented. Harping on sinfulness without offering an attractive alternative is the real issue. It's okay for a while, but when you've been hearing it a life time, you simply have to turn it off.

So instead of viewing sin the usual way, we can look at it from the Hebrew verbal root *chata'*. Fundamentally it means to miss a goal or mark as in target practice with a bow and arrow. In this instance when you shoot an arrow and miss you don't have a hissy fit and walk away. Instead, the very act of missing the target makes you want to try again. Engaging in target practice changes your attitude; hitting the target is secondary to the act of shooting arrows. And so it turns out to be exhilarating, not

debilitating. While we're drawn automatically to this image, applying it to sin as we've grown accustomed to it is not so easy. However, like shooting with a bow and arrow, practice makes perfect.

Could this image embodied by *chata'* tie in with the backward gesture suggested by *metanoeo*? Yes, because we can understand the wrong direction in which we've been headed as missing of the mark, of missing the goal we had in mind when we set out on our journey. We realize too that something just outside the reach of our awareness may be at work as it attempts to control the direction of our lives. It tries to derail us chiefly through the traditional notion of sin, a perfect disguise. This is conceived as "original sin" or fruit of the serpent in the Garden of Eden. Take your choice. It doesn't matter right now, just recognition of an added element bearing down upon us. It all amounts to creating a pervasive pall of guilt and is a subtle ploy not easy to detect as it works quietly in the background. So in the end our own deficiency plus a force external to ourselves work together causing a lot of confusion needing to be sorted out.

We could shift gears a bit and call this difficult-to-detect combination of forces at work within us as an act of hijacking. Some years ago this notorious practice was all the rage when terrorists were seizing airplanes and asking for ransom or the like. However, it has fallen out of fashion and replaced by something else. So to be hijacked means that while we've been going our merry way—usually a predetermined route where everything is laid out in order—somewhere somehow we're thrown off course. We're stopped dead in our tracks but are too caught up in the suddenness of it all to reflect on what happened. In other words, we're left holding the bag, that is, we've been diverted without our knowledge until it's too late.

After we've come to grips with the fact that we've been hijacked, we want to take out our frustration on whomever is responsible. Vengeance is the name of this game. Yet we're not in any position when we find ourselves in a helpless position. Clearly from this position any plotting is useless. Instead, we should take advantage of our disadvantage. That means making the necessary but painful decision to put on the back burner thoughts about how we got to where we are now, especially plans for revenge. In their place we need to go all the way back when we had been laying out plans for our spiritual journey. That involves how we had set up our route...where we planned to go and what baggage, if any, we were going to take along.

Such planning is the exact place where we experience mostly the frustration of being hijacked, not the time nor place itself. This reveals how important memories are. We put greater stock in the planning rather than in the actual event. It harkens back to an experience many of us have had when kids when our parents had planned a road trip. They sent away for the fold-out maps with the route marked in orange over which we lovingly pour again and again. The trip itself—wonderful as it may be—is secondary both once we’re within it and after we’ve come home. Perhaps this has something to do with the preference we have with virtual reality over real reality.

Enough said about the planning stage which could form a separate essay. Returning to what is described as a *metanoeo*, we can take this verb literally as something which grabs hold of our minds...our *nous*...and deliberately plants them after...*meta*...in places they’re not accustomed to or places which which they’re not fond to migrate. We have to approach this taking hold of seriously and understand it in an almost physical sense. If we don’t allow our minds to be picked up forcefully we’ll sit on the side as victims of whatever idle thoughts happen to pass by and follow them. This is in a direction completely opposite to where our *nous* tends to go which happens to be a less than desirable place. No need to expound on that because it’s common knowledge. We all know from experience that the *nous* has a strange habit to gravitate in one direction if left unchecked, downward. However, visualizing it gives a new perspective, for if we left it un-visualized, we’d remain stuck in the same old familiar rut. It should be noted that the early Cistercian fathers have a great term for this, *curva* obviously the Latin for curve ¹.

Let’s continue examining this *metanoeo* in physical terms because it’s easier to understand that way. As for the *curva* just described, its very shape infers more than one direction, the alternative being upward. It’s more appealing than another well known image with regard to things spiritual, a ladder. A ladder is straight up and down as we find with Jacob’s dream. The slope of the *curva* might have a lot as to why the early Cistercians liked it. While our proclivity is to focus on the downward motion, it remains within our power to reverse this downward slide on the *curva* and go upward, escalator-like. This might seem as putting too much stock into an image which is not an objective reality. Such is the problem with an image based on physical reality, but we have to agree that for the most part it works out well. For the purpose of describing *metanoeo*, *curva* is a fine image because it represents our inward

¹ Several references to *curva* and its verbal root are at the end of this document in an appendix. The same applies to the “land of unlikeness,” the place where this *curva* terminates (downward).

propensity downward. This is really interesting because you stop and wonder why we have an innate propensity to sink in that direction.

First of all, sliding downward is easy because it follows the path of least resistance, the natural pull of gravity. Perhaps that's why gravity balks at *metanoeo* because it goes against the natural grain of things. So here we have something impinging upon our entire lives that otherwise would have been left undetected. It's easy to miss because constantly we and everything else are being pulled to the center of the earth. This tug is so universal it makes us prone to depict everything as either up and down. Even left to right or right to left is done while hugging the earth.

With this in mind we can understand *metanoeo* as going against this pull of gravity. We situate *nous* as *meta* (that is, we situate mind as after) instead of allowing it to remain in its usual position as before, the direction it'd go if left unchecked. This amounts to throwing our forward gear into reverse which we perceive as unnatural and rightly so. And that unnatural movement is upward (the *meta* of our *nous*). Perhaps that's why people have been attracted to stories where people go up as to heaven which they perceive as their true homeland, not the earth. Once there they're not necessarily devoid of interest of what's below but wish that those living on earth someday could be where they are right now.

As we've all seen, a rocket launching into space requires lots of power to break free of earth's gravitation. Once it does, boosters fall away and the capsule or whatever is in front goes into orbit around the earth. In one way it's free from gravity but in another, remains just as much a prisoner but only on a different plane. Such captivity is clearly evident by the capsule going round and round without ceasing. It can stay in that position almost forever which is scary, keeping in mind how this image can impact our lives. So we have to break free of gravity once and for all. Apparently gravity is at work beyond the pull of a planetary body or star...subtle but still detectable. That's where the traditional image of a ladder has come in. It goes from one place to another, making a clear-cut break. However, as pointed out above, the image of a curve is more appealing since there's less emphasis on a break and more on a slide back to where we came from.

Although what has been described can be liberating, it remains just that, a description. The difficult part comes next and can be outlined as follows. An experience in the normal course of life throws you off kilter which means you must reassess the direction it's leading you. The influences streaming towards us never stop their assault which means they move us in a certain direction and that direction

is invariably downward along the *curva* image. You can't pinpoint their source nor is it worth the effort to do so at the moment. What we do know is that these assaults consist of unpleasant memories seemingly tailored for where we are right now. They don't come from God but let's say from someplace else. It's a place we don't want to visit nor attach images in an attempt to describe it. Rather, the best approach is simply watch it...kind of stare it down but not forcefully...and watch it scatter not due to our ability but on its own.

If our attention drifts—let's say slides downward in accord with the slope of the *curva*—we find it difficult to resist the pull of gravity. In other words, we find ourselves in what the early Cistercians termed “land of unlikeness,” the usual word being *dissimilitudo*. The negative *dis-* is prefaced to *similitudo* or likeness, resemblance, imitation. This word helps name where we are most of the time and has a way of calming things down, of taming them. Also one can't help but recall the famous image of the cave-like dwelling in the **Republic**. Because several other articles have discussed that image, it won't be rehashed here except to say that the man who got up and left decided to exit via that *curva* upward, the same *curva* leading downward on which perhaps those in the semi-darkness had slid in the first place.

So the three “Cistercian” words *curva*, *similitudo* and *dissimilitudo* provide a great thumbnail sketch of what this article is about. Refining it further, we could say that *similitudo* is the top of the *curva* and *dissimilitudo* is the bottom with *metanoeo* being the means to get from the bottom to the top.

Since most of us find ourselves at the bottom of the *curva*, there's a danger that from this position we want to usurp the top without making use of the *curva*. This is a way of showing that we want to possess what is above without the necessary *metanoia*. We'd simply rather not put our *nous meta*...our minds after...too threatening. We feel this way because despite being at the bottom, we retain a residual memory of what is at the top which is immune to being blotted out. For example, Heb 11.14 and 16 give voice to this: “For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland...But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one” [Heb 11.14 & 16].

This Hebrews quote has the advantage of situating certain noted biblical persons within a story-like context because it makes concrete the nature of this *curva*. In addition, the Cistercians see *curva* as dealing with moral and spiritual defects and situate it within the living laboratory of monastic living. As for those in Hebrews, by

1 See end of document for these references along with *curva*.

no means are they considered as depraved. More accurately, they find themselves in an environment as the result of accumulated deprivation. That's where their "land of unlikeness" is an apt description for life at the bottom of the *curva*. Note that vs. 13 has those living here as "having seen it (what was promised) and greeted it from afar, having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth." Their seeing is as at the bottom of a barrel looking up.

They acknowledge this homeland we could designate the "land of likeness" or similitude, *aspazomai* fundamentally as to welcome kindly or to salute. It's context is not up and close but with regard to something at a considerable yet reachable distance. Such *aspazomai* is done only after having acknowledged (*homologeō* literally as to speak the same as the same language) they were strangers and exiles on earth. The latter is an unusual term, *parepidemos* which must be the subject of this *homologeō*. It consists of the root *demos* or land, country, and has two prepositions prefaced to it, *para* and *epi*, beside and upon...i.e., a land where you are living beside-upon it.

With regard to the land above or the one associated with *similitudo*, there's no living beside-upon. It's simply plain ol' *demos* which is so liberating that we can have a hard time grasping what this means. We don't have to change *demos* but shake off the *para* and *epi* attached to it. This precludes any need to move, which gives a more attractive twist to the idea of *metanoēō*. Another way of putting it is that we simply drop the *dis-* or unlikeness prefaced to *similitudo*, that is, the *dissimilitudo*. And dropping is the easiest thing in the world, almost too good to accept.

Time to bring this short article to a rather abrupt conclusion. The reason? It pulls strongly in the direction of the Letter to the Hebrews which lends itself to development in part through the medium of a story. Although a text on Hebrews is posted already on this site, the same book can be addressed from the approach just pointed out. That is to say, it can be subject to expansion from within, staying within the bounds of the text yet pushing out from within. That means external "stuff" isn't added but brought to light from within. So the text at hand is a kind of preface...a dry-run...with regard to this approach. That means it begins right away.

A footnote of sorts, if you will...Obviously this article is full of defects and could be written more clearly and coherently. Please be aware of this and take it simply as a kind of sketch or outline, nothing more.

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Five *curva* references in **The Song Commentary** by Bernard of Clairvaux:

24.7: *Istiusmodi ergo curvae animae non possunt diligere sponsam, quoniam non sunt amicae sponsi, cum sint mundi.*

Those whose souls *are warped* in this fashion cannot love the Bridegroom, because they are not friends of the Bridegroom, they belong to this world.

36.5: *Talis corporis aggravatam, terrenis intricatam curis, carnalium desideriorum faece infectam, caecam, curvam, infirmam (etc.).*

How can he escape being genuinely humbled on acquiring this true self-knowledge, on seeing the burden of sin that he carries, the oppressive weight of his mortal body, the complexities of earthly cares, the corrupting influence of sensual desires; on seeing his blindness, his *worldliness*, his weakness (etc.).

75.3: *A quo enim tunc non requiretur? Mihi, inquit, curvabitur omne genu (Is 45.24).*
Who will not seek him then? “To me,” he says, “every knee *shall bow.*”

80.3: *Sed est, quo capax aeternorum; eo recta, quo appetens supernorum: quae non quaerit nec sapit quae sursum sunt, sed quae super terram, non plane est recta, sed curva, cum tamen pro huiusmodi magna esse non desinat, manens utique etiam sic aeternitatis capax.*

But if, as I argued before, the soul is great in proportion to its capacity for the eternal, and upright in proportion to its desire for heavenly things, then the soul which does not desire or have a taste for heavenly things, but clings to earthly things, is clearly not upright but *bent*.

80.4: *Et inde misero homini incurvanti se, et incubanti his quae in terra sunt, flebilis vox illa de psalmo: Miser factus sum, et curvatus sum usque in finem; tota die contristatus ingrediebar (Ps 37.7). In semetipso siquidem experitur veritatem illius sententiae Sapientis: Deus rectum hominem fecit, ipse autem se implicuit doloribus multis (Eccl 7.30). Et continuo vox ludibrii ad eum: Incurvare ut transeamus (Is 60.23).*

So it is to the unhappy man who is *bending* and brooding over earthly things that the melancholy voice from Psalms refers: ‘I am troubled. I am bowed down to the earth.’ I go in sadness all the day long.’ He has experienced the truth of the saying of the Preacher: ‘God made man upright, but he is bowed down by many troubles.’ Then immediately afterwards he is told mockingly, ‘*Bow down*, so that we may walk over you.’

Land of unlikeness references in **The Song Commentary** by Bernard of Clairvaux:

27.6: *Quod evidentius coelestis insigne originis, quam ingenitam, et in regione dissimilitudinis, retinere similitudinem, gloriam vitae caelibis in terra, et ab exsule, usurpari, in corpore denique pene bestiali vivere angelum?*

What can be a clearer sign of her heavenly origin than that she retains a natural likeness to it in the land of unlikeness, than that as an exile on earth she enjoys the glory of the celibate life, than that she lives like an angel in an animal body?

31.2: *Quod nec ipsum quidem aliquatenus posses, si non aliqua ex parte ipsum lumen corporis tui, pro sui ingenita serenitate et perspicuitate, coelesti lumini simile esset. Non denique alterum membrum corporis capax est luminis, ob multam utique dissimilitudinem. Sed nec ipse oculus, cum turbatus fuerit, lumini propinquabit, nimirum ob amissam similitudinem. Qui ergo turbatus, nullatenus serenum solem videt propter dissimilitudinem; serenus aliquatenus videt propter nonnullam similitudinem.*

Just as the troubled eye, then, cannot gaze on the peaceful sun because of its unlikeness, so the peaceful eye can behold it with some efficacy because of a certain likeness. If indeed it were wholly equal to it in purity, with a completely clear vision it would see it as it is, because of the complete likeness.

31.3: *Porro jam praesentibus non aliud est videre sicuti est, quam esse sicuti est, et aliqua dissimilitudine non confundi.*

For those thus arrived in his presence, to see him as he is means to be as he is, and not to be put to shame by any form of unlikeness. But, as I have said, this is for the next life.

62.7: *Placeat necesse est facies, quae in Dei claritatem intendere potest. Neque enim id posset, nisi clara ipsa quoque esset et pura, utique transformata in eamdem quam conspicit claritatis imaginem. Alioquin ipsa dissimilitudine resiliret, insolito reverberata fulgore. Ergo cum pura puram intueri potueri veritatem, tunc faciem ipsius sponsus videre cupiet, consequenter et vocem ejus audire.*

The face that can focus on the brightness of God must of necessity be pleasing. Nor could it accomplish this unless it were itself bright and pure, transformed into the very image of the brightness it beholds. Otherwise it would recoil through sheer unlikeness, driven back by the unaccustomed splendor.

82.2: *Sed quod Scriptura loquitur de dissimilitudine facta, non quia similitudo ista deleta sit loquitur, sed quia alia superducta.*

Now when Holy Scripture speaks of the unlikeness that has come about, it says not that the likeness has been destroyed, but concealed by something else which has been laid over it.

82.5: Hoc de simplicitate, hoc de immortalitate animae advertere est: et nil tibi in ea, si bene consideres, apparebit, quod non sit istiusmodi similitudinis pariter et dissimilitudinis diploide adopertum.

What is said of the immortality of the soul may also be said of its simplicity and, if you reflect, you will find nothing in that which is not similarly covered with the folds of likeness and unlikeness.

82.6: Sed, si statuatur iniquus ante faciem suam, et contra vultum quemdam morbidum putidumque interioris hominis sui sistatur, ut dissimulare aut declinare non queat impuritatem conscientiae suae, sed videat vel invitus sordes peccatorum suorum, vitiorum inspiciat deformitatem; nequaquam jam poterit existimare Deum fore similem sibi, sed quasi diffidens pro tanta dissimilitudine quam videbit, puto exclamabit, et dicet: Domine, quis similis tibi? (Psal. XXXIV, 10.) quod quidem dictum pro voluntaria illa et novitia dissimilitudine. Nam manet prima similitudo: et ideo illa plus displicet, quod ista manet. O quantum bonum ista, quantumque malum illa! Ex mutua tamen collatione utraque res in genere suo plus eminet.

But if the wicked man is made to look at himself and to stand face to face with the deathly and decaying appearance of his inner self until he cannot disguise or disown the uncleanness of his conscience, but must, even against his will, see the foulness of his own sins and look upon the deformity of his vices, he will certainly not be able to think that God is like him; he will be in despair when he sees the great difference between them, and I think he will cry out, 'Lord, who is like you?' - which was indeed said in recognition of that new but voluntary unlikeness. But the primal likeness remains, and this increases the soul's distress at the unlikeness. How good the one is, how evil the other! And the nature of each is shown more clearly as they are seen side by side.

83.2: Et utique ad hoc auctor ipse Deus divinae insigne generositatis perpetuo voluit in anima conservari, ut semper haec in sese ex Verbo habeat, quo admoneatur semper, aut stare cum Verbo, 1182B aut redire, si mota fuerit. Non mota quasi locis migrans, aut pedibus gradiens, sed mota (sicut substantiae utique spirituali moveri est cum suis affectibus, imo defectibus) a se quodam modo in pejus vadit, cum se sibi vitae et morum pravitate dissimilem facit, reddit degenerem: quae tamen dissimilitudo non naturae abolitio, sed vitium est, bonum ipsum naturae quantum sui comparatione attollens, tantum foedans conjunctione.

This is why God, its Creator, desires the divine glory and nobility to be always preserved in the soul, so that it may have within itself that by which it may always

be admonished by the Word, either to stay with him or to return to him if it has strayed. It does not stray by changing its place or by walking, but it strays -- as is the nature of a spiritual substance, in its affections, or rather its defections, and it degenerates and becomes unlike itself when it becomes unlike him in its depravity of life and manners; but this unlikeness is not the destruction of its nature but a defect, for natural goodness is increased as much by comparison with itself as it is spoiled by communication with evil.

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