

The Cherub and the Thief

A Syriac dialogue poem

Helen Brock

Some background points

THIS Friday morning slot is one where we might expect to have a meditation on the Passion of Our Lord. A dramatic presentation, even with a bit of humour in it, may come as a surprise or seem downright unsuitable. But actually, a meditation on the Passion is exactly what it is.

A word about the background. What we are going to read is a Syriac dialogue poem. Syriac is a dialect of Aramaic, the language Our Lord spoke on earth. There is a great deal of wonderful Christian literature in Syriac which is barely known in the West. The dialogue poem is a form with a very long history. It began in Mesopotamia—now Iraq—nearly 4000 years ago and has been a living tradition ever since. The great Syriac poet-theologian St. Ephrem adapted this ancient form for Christian use in the middle of the 4th century. It remains popular today among Christians in Syria, Iraq, Iran and Turkey and in their scattered communities in Europe and North and South America and new poems and new versions of old ones go on being made.

The poem we are going to read is one of the most popular and is sometimes acted out in churches. There are a number of versions and people continue to make new ones. I have some copies of a modern reworking created recently in America, where the terms 'President', 'aliens' and 'visa' are used, terms which strike home to immigrants and asylum-seekers. The version we are reading today is the original one. It was written in the 5th century. The author is unknown.

Most dialogue poems are in verse, with two Biblical characters having a dispute or an argument about something. The argument is presented in a lively manner, often with some humour, but it is meant to make us think about some profound theological truth. In this one the Penitent Thief turns up at the Gate of Paradise, the Gate of the Garden of Eden. The Gate is guarded by the Cherubim and the whirling sword of fire which God put there when He drove Adam and Eve out of the Garden. The Cherub is very firm with the Thief and rather haughty (he is not only an angel, but an angel of very high rank). He insists that no man is to enter and even shows the Thief Adam's footprints, which only go in one direction—out. In fact this Angel is not a million miles away from a nightclub bouncer. But the Thief stands his ground and talks to the Angel as

an equal, insisting that Our Lord, the Angel's boss, has said he can come in. Finally he shows his entry permit—the Cross of Calvary. The Angel is instantly overcome with awe. He lets the Thief in and together they sing a hymn of praise.

So this *is* a meditation on the Passion and indeed on the Resurrection. We are invited to reflect on what Our Lord's Cross has done for us. We fell into sin and we have no *right* to be allowed back into our original home, the Garden of Eden, but Our Lord in His immeasurable love has paid the price of our 're-entry permit' by suffering and dying for us on the Cross, and because of what He did, now each and every one of us, however bad we were, can be restored.

The whole poem is full of allusions to Scripture. In the Syriac Churches people will catch most of the allusions, because their services are strongly Bible-based, but they are apt to be a problem for Roman Catholic lay people, who do not have so much exposure to the Epistles and the Old Testament and do not have an old established translation that leaves them with a stock of memorable phrases in their heads.

The translation is by Sebastian Brock with a word changed here and there by Helen Brock. There is no copyright. Anyone is free to make a new version.

Biblical Allusions

- (a) Adam driven out of Eden; Cherubim and a revolving flaming sword set to guard the path to the Tree of Life (Genesis 3: 24). ('Paradise', a Persian word for the garden and hunting park of Persian kings; taken over as a loanword into Greek and used for the Garden of Eden and also for the Hebrew Sheol, the place of the dead.)
- (b) The penitent thief (Luke 23: 43). 'Seeing that I have acknowledged You'. Luke 12: 8 'Whoever shall confess me before men, him shall the Son of man also confess before the angels of God'.
- (c) 'Who transported you across the sea of fire so that you could enter Eden?' The image of a sea of fire originated outside Judaism and Christianity, perhaps in Zoroastrianism in Persia. It is mentioned frequently in apocalyptic literature.
- (d) 'But now He is reconciled and has opened the gate.' Cf. Romans 5: 10, Ephesians 2: 16.
- (e) 'With the blood from His side He has washed me completely clean.' John 19: 34.
- (f) ' Eve and Adam fell into debt and wrote out an I.O.U. that will not be erased.' Colossians. 2: 14.
- (g) 'They went out of here under sentence to live in low estate in the land of thorns' Genesis 3: 17-19 'Cursed is the ground for thy sake...Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee....In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread....for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.'

- (h) 'For the great Shepherd has gone out....' John 10: 11, 1 Peter 5: 4.
- (i) 'Carrying him on His shoulders.' Luke 15: 5.
- (j) 'He has raised up whole crowds from inside Sheol.' Matthew. 27: 52-53.
- (k) 'A fiery being like me cannot be vanquished.' 'The ranks of fiery spirits are standing here.' Ps.104: 4; 103: 4 ('He maketh His angels spirits and His ministers a flaming fire').
- (l) 'The sign of my Lord is seated upon the Chariot, resplendent upon the Throne, but from us it is hidden.' 1 Chronicles 28: 18 ('the chariot of the cherubim that spread out their wings'), Isaiah 37: 16 ('O Lord of hosts, God of Israel, that dwellest between the cherubims'). Sometimes God is spoken of as riding in a chariot or on a cherub. (2 Samuel 22: 11 and Ps. 18: 10 contain some wonderful dramatic verses, 'He rode upon the cherubim and did fly' etc. This description of God as exercising His power in nature was 'lifted' by the Jewish poet straight from an ancient pagan hymn in the Ugaritic language discovered by archaeologists and deciphered in the 1930s.) There are references to God seated on a chariot throne, and to the Throne of God in the temple. The Throne was where the Divine Presence and the glory of the Lord was especially concentrated but of course it was empty and was only the 'sign' of the Lord, hidden even from the angels. The Throne was decorated with figures of winged composite creatures such as griffins (lion body, bird head and wings; the words 'cherub' and 'griffin' seem to be philologically related), like thrones of pagan kings in Isaiah's time. Archaeologists have found such ivory throne decorations in Samaria. In pagan temples that place was occupied by a large statue of the deity, like the huge gold and ivory statue of Athene in the Parthenon in Athens.
- (m) 'The Cross of your Lord has breached the wall of partition that had been built up between us and you.' This seems to echo Ephesians 2: 14 'For He is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us'. St. Paul is referring there not to the wall separating earth and Paradise but to the 'wall' between Jews and gentiles, but both walls have been broken down by the Cross.
- (n) Enter in, O heir to the kingdom! Romans 8: 17 (we are joint-heirs with Christ).
- (o) 'You cherubim and angels, rejoice with us.' Luke 15: 10.
- (p) 'The Meek and Lowly One.' Matthew 11: 29 'Take my yoke upon you and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart'.

THE DISPUTE BETWEEN THE CHERUB AND THE THIEF

(based on Luke 23: 43 and Genesis 3: 24)

Narrator: At the Crucifixion I beheld a marvel
when the Thief cried out to Our Lord,
'Remember me, Lord, on the day when You come
to that Kingdom which does not pass away.'

All: Praise to You, Lord, for at Your coming
(Refrain) sinners turned back from their wickedness.
They entered and found shelter
in the garden of Eden—which is the Holy Church.

Narrator: The Thief made a petition. He stretched out and gave it
to the crucified King, asking for mercy;
and He who is full of mercy heard his cry
and opened the door to his request.

'Remember me, Lord,' was what he cried out on his cross,
'in that Kingdom which does not pass away;
and in that glory in which You will be revealed
may I behold Your compassion,
seeing that I have acknowledged You.'

Our Lord replied, 'Since you have acknowledged Me'
this very day you shall be in the Garden of Eden.
In very truth, man, you will not be kept back
from that Kingdom to which you are looking.

Take with you the Cross as a sign, and set off on your way.
The Cross is a great key whereby the mighty gate
of that Garden shall be opened
and Adam, who has been driven out, shall enter again.'

The word of Our Lord was sealed
like a royal missive from the palace.
It was handed over to the Thief,
who took it and made off for the Garden of Eden.

The Cherub heard him and rushed up.
He grabbed the Thief at the gate,
stopping him with the sharp blade that he held.
All astonished, he addressed the Thief with these words.

Cherub: Tell me, man, who has sent you here?
What is it you want, and how did you get here?
What is the reason that brought you here?
Explain yourself and tell me who has sent you.

Thief: I will tell you who has sent me.
Just hold back your blade and listen to my words.
I am a thief, but I begged for mercy,
and it was your Lord who sent me on my way here.

Cherub: By what powerful means were you transported here?
Who brought you to this dread spot?
Who transported you across the sea of fire
so that you could enter Eden? Who is it that sent you?

Thief: It was through the power of the Son of God, Who sent me,
that I crossed over and came here without hindrance.
Through Him I overcame all obstacles
and I have come to enter here, seeing that He has given me
confidence.

Cherub: You are indeed a thief, just as you have said,
but you cannot steal into this region of ours.
It is fenced with the sword that guards it.
Turn back, man! You have lost your way.

- Thief: Yes, I was indeed a thief, but I have changed.
It was not in order to steal that I have come here.
Look, I've got with me the key to Eden,
to open the gate and get in. I will not be prevented!
- Cherub: Our region is awesome and no man can set foot in it,
for fire is its indomitable wall.
The blade flashes out all around it.
How is it that you have made so bold as to come here?
- Thief: Your region is indeed awesome, just as you have said,
...but only until Our Lord mounted the Cross,
when He transfixing the sword of all suffering,
so that your blade no longer kills.
- Cherub: Ever since the time that Adam left
I have never seen anyone turn up here.
Your race has been banished from the Garden.
You are not coming in, so don't argue any further.
- Thief: Ever since the time that Adam left,
your Lord has been angry with our race.
But now He is reconciled and has opened the gate.
There is no point in your standing guard here now.
- Cherub: You need to understand that it is not possible
for an unclean man to enter here –
and you are a murderer and a shedder of blood.
Who is it that brought you to this pure place?
- Thief: You need to understand that such is the wish
of Him Who makes the unclean clean, Who was crucified together
[with me.
With the blood from His side He has washed me completely clean
It was He who has sent me to Paradise.
- Cherub: Be off with you, man, and don't argue any further.
This is what I have been ordered to do:
to guard from your race, by the means of this sword,
the Tree of Life which stands in here.
- Thief: Be off with you, angel! You must learn and see
that I've left behind, hanging on Golgotha,
the very Fruit of Salvation that's in your Garden,
so that our race may enter now with no hindrance.
- Cherub: Eve and Adam fell into debt
and wrote out a debit statement that will not be erased.
They went out of here under sentence
to live in low estate in the land of thorns.
- Thief: The debt has been repaid.
The debit statement has been nailed to the Cross.
By means of both blood and water your Lord has wiped it out
and has pinned it there with nails, so that the debt cannot be collected.

- Cherub: Adam was driven out from this Garden
and there is no way he can get back in.
The blade of the sword whirls round and round,
blocking his way should he ever come near.
- Thief: He who was driven out has returned to his Father's house,
for the great Shepherd has gone out and found
the sheep that had strayed from the Garden.
He has laid him on His shoulders and has brought him back.
- Cherub: This is something completely novel that I've seen today,
a path leading back into the Garden!
But here are Adam's footprints. Take a look.
He left here and has never come back.
- Thief: Jesus your Lord has performed a novel deed,
for now He has released Adam, who had been imprisoned.
He has raised up whole crowds from inside Sheol,
and He has sent me on ahead, to open up for them.
- Cherub: I am the cherub! How is it that you have transgressed
against my office of standing guard, with which I have been
[entrusted?
A fiery being like me cannot be vanquished.
As for you, offspring of Adam, how bold you are!
- Thief: I am your companion and we have but one Lord
in common for both of us.
His authority is much higher than either yours or mine,
and so I have no fear, since He is the one who has sent me.
- Cherub: The simple truth is, you cannot enter in here,
for it is a place of shining splendour where no man can set foot.
The tabernacle of God's glory is escorted around inside it,
and the sword of fire is guarding it.
- Thief: You cannot hold anyone back,
for now the sword has been blunted and made dull.
The Cross has opened up the Garden of Eden.
There is no means of keeping it closed any more.
- Cherub: Haven't you heard from the Bible
how the cherub and the sword go round,
guarding the way to the Garden of Eden
so that no offspring of Adam can enter here?
- Thief: Haven't you heard from the Revelation
that your Lord has come down and become man,
and so has reconciled Adam, who had been harbouring
[resentment,
and brought back to Eden the one who had been expelled?
- Cherub: The sign of the revolving sword
that guards the Tree of Life
frightened Adam away when he was driven out,
so how is it that you are not afraid?

- Thief: Resurrection has come for the race of mankind
that had been thrust out of their home.
You cherubim and angels, rejoice with us,
for now we have returned to your city.
- Cherub: Great is the compassion that has been shown to you,
the descendants of Adam who sinned and thus died.
Enter in, thief! You will not be kept back,
for now the gate is open for those who repent.
- Thief: Great and most glorious is the compassion of my Lord,
for His mercy has accomplished all and His love has compelled Him.
Rejoice with us, O you spiritual beings,
for we have been mingled into your race.
- Cherub: The Meek and Lowly One has held back from your race
the blade and the sword that I have been wielding.
You outcasts who have returned, have no fear!
Enter into the Garden with exultation!
- Thief: Praise be in Eden that is now at peace,
peace on the earth, which has been set free!
Blessed is the Crucified One Who has reconciled us,
so that we shall no longer be deprived of your race.
- ALL: Thanks be to You, O Lord of all,
Who have brought back Adam from his exile,
while to the thief who asked for mercy
You opened the gate that had been closed.
- Thanks be to You, at Whose word
the thief entered into the Garden of Eden,
and there was good hope for Adam again
and he returned to the place whence he was exiled.