

THE WOODLOUSE SERMON

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I am very fond of woodlice: isopoda armadillidiidae. All the best cathedral sermons have a bit of superfluous Latin, it raises the tone of the thing and makes everyone feel learned, although curiously enough we shall see that this bit of latinity is not wholly irrelevant.

They are catholic little creatures because their habitat is universal, they are found under various sub-species in pretty well every country in the world. Many such foreign species have somehow got themselves imported into this country and have established themselves in company with the native British variety, which conversely have managed to get themselves established in most other countries: quite Anglican in fact.

So I feel some friendly rapport with the woodlouse, and was considerably upset one winter morning when I collected the last of my heap of logs, exposing a startled colony of them. They behaved characteristically; some attempted a flight to the wilderness, and I so much hope that many reached it. Others formed themselves into close little communities for what protection they could find, I tried to help them find a more suitable abode but regrettably without much success. There were others who rolled themselves up into little balls, as is their wont, for protection against predators, yet seemingly accepting martyrdom with uncomplaining fortitude.

How different was their response to that of an anthill under similar circumstances; a disturbed anthill degenerates into a solid mass of feverish activity which gets the ants nowhere. Ants are not only essentially Pelagian, but also exponents of the coarser aspects of the protestant ethic: work hard for material success and the Lord will reward you. Disturb other creatures, like hares, and they will rush off all alone, proudly rejecting assistance from any quarter. Ants have to be in community, the wrong sort of little communists, loyal to the system but utterly incapable of personal initiative: an ant never comes up with an original idea. Hares are loners, not because they are of unique genius but because they are incapable of creative relationship: then comes March and they go mad.

But woodlice have got it all: community interplay, creative dialogue, yet always capable of going in search of the wilderness, of running a risk and taking a chance; even to the extent of rolling themselves up in little balls, hoping for the best and willing to cope with the worst. They have the supreme gift of being able to give in.

So the last log disturbed me as well as them. It was so cold, and I would willingly have given up my lovely wood fire if that would have meant happiness and satisfaction for a single woodlouse. But the damage having been done, simply replacing the last log would have achieved nothing. So what could I do to put things right? I could see answers to the problem; a few feet away there was a big stone slab, suitably damp and dank, probably a better place than the original log. I could lift it and shoo the woodlice under it, but they would not be shooed. Force was of no use, for even a rubber spatula would be too rough to avoid damaging them. So I gave up. Then horror of horrors; sitting morosely by the fire a woodlouse emerged from a smouldering crevice. I tried to rescue it from the flames but again without success. The tragedy was that it could easily have saved itself by taking a certain direction, along the log and down a piece of kindling wood that had not yet caught fire; first left and there was the safety of the hearth. This woodlouse would not have been happy on the warm stone, they like damp cold and dark places, but at least this one would have been safe.

What can I do to help them over circumstances in which they cannot help themselves? I have tried talking to them, but they cannot understand; I have tried gently, ever so gently, to prod them into a happier environment, but all to no avail. I am fond of woodlice, I have even supplied them with very young luscious seedlings which they like to eat, but they still seem to prefer to go their own way in their own good time. Yes I am fond of them, but they offer little response; perhaps I am giving way to sentimentality? Perhaps after all they are not worth all the trouble? Let them stew in their own juice. But no, I cannot but be concerned, how can I show my love for them?

It is an utterly fantastic idea, but suppose I could somehow manage to enter into direct communication with them? Could I pretend to be a woodlouse? In fact could I actually become a woodlouse? Then I could talk to them in their own language, demonstrate a better way, but what would that entail? Could I, or would I, give up my humanity, forego for ever perhaps the joys of human culture, no more art, music or literature? No more robust physical pleasures like eating partridge and drinking claret, no more family life with a humanly loving wife and family, for woodlice are hermaphrodite. All this sacrifice in an analogical way is roughly what theology means by kenosis; a total self-emptying on behalf of an infinitely inferior species. Do I really love woodlice as much as that? Would I freely make such a sacrifice on their behalf? In the famous words of Eliza Doolittle: 'not bloody likely'. Not least because I have a hunch that with all the goodwill in the world, the experiment would turn out to be bloody. Yes woodlice are charming little creatures, clean and wholesome, doing harm to nobody and nothing, but I doubt if they would accept me. I doubt if they would understand my good intentions, and I doubt if they would really understand objective love. There would be every chance that they would reject my advice and object to my

interference; they would turn on me and push me into an heretical ant-hill, to be torn apart and crucified.

The analogy hardly needs translation, except to add that to turn me into a woodlouse is an infinitely small step compared with turning God into man. For, returning to St Thomas Aquinas, humans and woodlice are on the same strata in the hierarchy of creation, we are both in the third division of the league, while God is creator of the total league, infinitely above and beyond the universe. Let us maintain at all costs the transcendental element, and yet there is the corresponding immanental side of things.

There are scores of analogies which attempt, never with complete success, to explain the doctrine of the one, holy and undivided Trinity, and there are all sorts of devotional techniques which attempt to give mystical insight into what is beyond the rational, like the contemplation of the clover leaf with three lobes, or a triangle, or intersecting circles, or the star of David. There is a tiny country church in Cornwall in which the roof of the sanctuary is decorated with sixteen different signs or mandala of the holy Trinity, the contemplation of any of which may give deeper insight into this intimate mystery than to come upon to come of academic reasoning. Not that such studies are superfluous; discursive consideration of the first portion of the Quicumque Vult, the so-called Athanasian creed, is a good, even essential prolegomena to the contemplation of mandala.

Could further symbolism add anything to our understanding? Perhaps, perhaps not. I sincerely hope that the following will not prove offensive to any reader; it might even be deemed impious, of going too far, but I take the risk. What trinitarian pattern emerges from the contemplation of a woodlouse?

As with the Athanasian creed, or similar formula, we have to begin with a few doctrinal facts, which is where our cathedral sermon custom of using a bit of Latin comes into its own. Biologically speaking a woodlouse, isopoda armadillidiidae looks as if it has a family resemblance with a beetle, or a centipede or some similar creature, but no. The woodlouse is not coleopterous or cheilopoda but isopoda, and its nearest relation, believe it or not, is a lobster. A further characteristic of a woodlouse is that its bodily waste products are converted into ammonia and exhaled as a gas through its whole body. What is called sulphate of ammonia in agriculture is a basic nitrogenous fertilizer supplying the most elemental and essential plant nutrient, so the gaseous exhalation from the woodlouse into the atmosphere unleashes nitrogen which sustains the vegetable kingdom and maintains soil fertility upon which all earthly life depends. Woodlice exhale life-giving properties. Dig up a broad bean plant and you will probably find two things: nodules that smell of ammonia and woodlice. Beans, peas, clover and all leguminosae share this characteristic with woodlice: they both give life-giving nutrient to soil and

atmosphere rather than absorbing it for their own self-centred purposes.

So where is our analogy now? C.S. Lewis was accused of impiety or worse by looking through the eyes of Screwtape and seeing God as the enemy. Yet the blessed Trinity is often described in terms of cold unfeeling geometry: triangles and leaves of clover and so on. Is it going too far, with due recognition of all the pitfalls of analogical reasoning, to think of God-the-Father-Lobster, the woodlouse Incarnate, and the all-pervading, immanent, life-giving Spirit of Ammonia-Nitrogenous gas which - or rather who - proceeds from them? After all the Lobster and the Woodlouse are of one substance - isopoda - and in this context we need not get all that stewed up about the filioque clause.

If I am not blowing my own trumpet too loudly there must be something in an analogy which schoolgirls, listening to a cathedral sermon by compulsion rather than choice, can remember after several years. How they interpret it is another question, yet we are taught to believe in the ultimate redemption, the christification (in Teilhard de Chardin's terminology) of all created things. It is possible that some are led to affective devotion of Jesus in his passion when they see a woodlouse caught in the flames; they might even think of the all-pervading Spirit when they see woodlice and broad beans giving off life-giving, sanctifying nitrogen.

It might prove to be a little more memorable, a bit more exciting, than triangles and clover leaves. And what is wrong in recollecting the love of our heavenly Father while we enjoy a lightsome lobster on Fridays in Lent?

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Editors note : I have reproduced Martin Thornton's text exactly as printed. Some isopodologists might quibble with the accuracy of the Latin but not, I'm sure, with the spirit of eulogy to woodlice which this article represents. Martin Thornton sadly died in June 1986. Irrespective of one's religious beliefs, his book makes delightful reading and is thoroughly recommended.