

Locating the Cubiculum: Early Christian musings on the Place of Prayer

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

matthew, chamber, pray, notion, privacy, hand, text, retreat, closet, secret, early modern period, room, prayer, space, ambrose

SPEAKERS

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Natália da Silva Perez 00:21

Hi. My name is Natália da Silva Perez and you're listening to the Privacy Studies Podcast. This episode is a lecture by Professor Mette Birkedal Bruun, Director of the Center for Privacy Studies. Mette discusses the Gospel of Matthew and its injunction to enter into the chamber to pray in secret. She covers the reception of this biblical passage through the centuries, going backwards from the early modern period all the way to the third century in early Christianity.

Mette Birkedal Bruun 00:53

I come to the cubiculum from this particular text. This is a text written by the English Bishop of Cork, Edward Wetenhall. And at first I was very intrigued, it gives two priv- words, very nice. So on the one hand, this idea that you cannot be a Christian, if you're a stranger to the notion of privacy, super nice for a church historian. The other is this idea of the private devotion. What's interesting about Wetenhall's text in our context is on the one hand the title, we'll come back to that, and on the other hand, that he talks about the closet, both as a space of privacy and actually as a real space. So he talks about how he would furnish his prayer closet, how it would have green cloth on the walls, it would have windows that could open so as to bring in fresh air, it would have candlesticks, a Bible. It would have a chair so that he could sit and read, perhaps even a bed so he could sleep. And so it really is a concrete space. So I went from that, of course, interested in "enter into thy closet" where it came from, and lo and behold, that's from Matthew 6.6. So here we had this idea, it's words, put into the mouth of Jesus in Matthew 6.6. "when you pray enter into thy chamber or thy closet, and close the door." Of course, if you're interested in privacy and notions of the private, that's a very nice passage. So I went back to the Bible to the New Testament. Then I went back up into the early modern period where I'm still interested in finding instances of reception of Matthew 6.6. So I'll just give you a few indications here. Here we have a funeral sermon on a mayor's wife from Flensburg, Margrethe Kløcker, and it rehearses the topos which is very, very common in funeral sermons of this period, that she was both very pious at church. So even though she was deaf towards the end of her life, she always enjoyed going to church, but she was also very pious at home you see, zu hause, and lo and behold, zu hause, she was like, Judith in her chamber so it's merging actually, Judith and Matthew 6.6, so she was praying in her chamber, she was thinking about Matthew 6.6. Just a parenthesis because I knew what Florian was going to talk about. So we have really Judith in the early modern period, of course, she becomes known for her slaying of Holofernes, but she also really becomes this figure of retreat. So it's both her violent act and her solitary prayer that actually is received. You were talking about the

reception and here we really have a reception where the retreat is very significant. Well, back to the Matthew 6.6 reception, so you had the *kammerlein* from the Lutheran or Luther's translation, from the King James, it becomes the closet, which gives rise to the notion of closet duty, which is the duty that you have to retreat into your closet, ever so often. I had the reference to the bees, mainly for the sake of *Gitte*. So you will have to tell her that there were bees. So he's going from his public duties to his closet duty. How nice is that? We have here also in [unintelligible] text the notion of the closet duty, so this obligation to retreat, and to actually sort of live Matthew 6.6. We have it in the French as well, but it's not quite as localized because the French biblical translation actually seems not, I haven't checked the earlier ones, but it seems that there's no sort of notion of a chamber. It's just this notion of retreat that also comes across in, you know, the text like this manual, where the idea of retreat is sort of reinforced by the notion of kneeling and turning inward. So this was my early modern searches for renderings of Matthew 6.6. From there, I began to go backwards. And I chanced upon this text, which I was really fascinated by. It's from the medieval Cistercian, Aelred of Rievaulx who blends the text on the Annunciation from Luke with Matthew 6.6 and the Song of Songs. "So thus says the evangelists. The angel went to her and said, hail Mary, full of grace. Where did he enter when he went to her? Without doubt, where she had hidden herself from world events and cares of the world. She had entered her private (or secret, depending on how it's translated), bridal chamber, [unintelligible] has this bridal connection), and had closed her door (that's clearly a Matthew 6.6) and was praying in private or in secret to her father." So this is nice in terms of scriptural mosaic. It's also very nice in that Aelred of Rievaulx being a Cistercian, had probably never seen a private chamber. Because the cistercians, as we know, they slept together, they ate together, they went to the latrines together, they were always together. So this idea of a private chamber, that was interesting for me to think about. What are the connotations actually? That brought me back, it brought me back to Professor Riggsby's article and it brought me back to a Kristina Sessa's article, which has already been mentioned, and this special issue of *Journal of early Christian studies*. That was when I wrote to you and said: "Will you come to Copenhagen at some point." I'm also like, you Florian very inspired by Sessa's article. But also, I want to add another dimension. So I think in her text, she's really into this notion of the *cubiculum* as a domestic space. She talks about it not necessarily being only material, but it's really clearly linked for her to the domestic space, I think. And I think we need another dimension to that rendering of the *cubiculum*. And that has brought me to a few early Christian texts that are reflecting upon Matthew 6.6. What they're thinking about is the place of prayer. They're wondering about how to reconcile the New Testament decrees that you should pray everywhere, which could be the last two, for instance. And then this notion that you should pray in your chamber. So they think about, how do we reconcile this. On the one hand, we are told to pray everywhere, on the other hand, we're told to pray in a very specific location. So this is one of the cruxes that underlie the texts that I'm going to talk about. So on the one hand, we have Cyprian, here, who says: "moreover, in his teaching, the Lord has bidden us to pray in secret, in hidden and remote places, in our very bed chambers (so this is Matthew 6.6), which is best suited to faith, that we may know that God is everywhere present. And hears and sees all and in the plenitude of His Majesty penetrates even into hidden and secret places, as it's written, I am a God at hand and not of God afar of." So the idea is really here, you can go into your chamber and pray because God will see you because God is everywhere and God sees everywhere. In Hilary of Poitiers, we have the following pondering of Matthew 6.6: "were instructed to pray with the door of our room closed, and likewise taught to offer our prayer in everywhere." So this is everyplace, this is this argh, how do we reconcile those two? "We are told to enter the secret places, not of a house, but of the room

of our heart. Inclosed within the privacy of our mind (we can discuss that translation), we are to pray to God." Then comes the second part of that. "not with copious speaking but with our understanding because very such prayer is superior to the words of our speech." So the other idea is this, that you have to pray in secret, which is then seen as a silent prayer. So there's on the one hand, the withdrawal into the chamber, and then there is a silent prayer. So here we have this spiritual understanding of the chamber, which would enable us or the authors to reconcile these two different biblical decrees. On the one hand to pray everywhere and on the other hand to pray in the chamber. If the chamber is understood as a spiritual term, to be rendering something about the heart, then we can make these two square, right? That becomes in Ambrose of Milan, the idea of a chamber within. "The apostle teaches us that we should pray everywhere, although the Savior says go into thy room." So again, argh difficult right? "but we must understand that the reference here is not to a room surrounded by walls, for the shelter of our person. We are rather to understand a room within us, in which to house our thoughts and perceptions." So again, we have this idea of the interior space. So the cubiculum of Matthew 6.6 becomes an interior space. That also means that it's portable. You can have your cubiculum with you, wherever you are, you can pray everywhere. And you can always pray in your chamber, you have your chamber everywhere, because your mind is your chamber. So that means no matter where you are, your secret in solitude, you preserve in the interior man. And here we have the notion of the [unintelligible] this really idea of entering into the cubiculum becomes a matter of entering into your inner space. And here in Ambrose, we have the beginning of something that I'm not going to venture into because other people in this room are more expert on Agustin but I think really, there is one dimension of this, that leads into the whole Augustinian idea of the interior architecture, and this whole notion of the different spaces within the interior man. And then we have Jerome, who is clearly thinking about translation or understanding here. "When you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father in secret." At the literal level, and I find this amazing also actually, in your presentation Florian, at the literal level, he's teaching, the understanding here are to flee from vainglory. So the literal level is not about a room, it's not about architecture, it's about retreating from the world. So it's a literal level that's seems already not quite literal, right. But it seems to me that there is more to this command. "We should pray to the Lord, with the thoughts of our heart shut in and with our lips compressed." So again, in terms of thresholds, we have both the bodily threshold of the lips, and then we have the inner space that's shut in, in our hearts. So where does this leave us with regards to privacy studies? On one hand, it's interesting for us because we're working across different cases. And we're working across different languages to have something like Matthew 6.6 because that allows us to pursue a particular figure across different contexts because we have the biblical renderings in many different languages in many different settings. It also means that we have other texts. So a text such as the *Imitatio Christi*, which is a late medieval text, which gets translated and rendered and retold and reconfigured. Which also has in chapter 20, which is about solitude, it has different versions of Matthew 6.6 enfolded into other biblical references to Psalms and whatnot. So it becomes a form of an anchor. And that doesn't mean that it's about privacy or the private each time, but it is an anchor, where to go for a terminological approach or to go for a particular [unintelligible]. So nice in terms of our approach. On the one hand, we have a particular place, which also leads to a particular activity. But once in a while comes with a priv- word as well. This is interesting, because it points both to completely spiritual renderings, such as Aelred's which is all about a spiritual chamber, but also a chamber such as the one devised by Wetenhall, which actually has a practical architectural, spatial component. A question that I think sort of remains and that's completely something I have not really pursued. But that is, what

happens to the Greek? I find that actually even more interesting compared to what you said, [unintelligible] now. What happens to the Greek of Matthew 6.6. I've just been sort of scanning a few Greek fathers who wrote on prayer, and also commentaries on Matthew and it doesn't seem to have the same kind of resonance in the Greek world and I'm not quite sure what to make of this. So that's a question. Thank you.

Natália da Silva Perez 15:24

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