



# Address at Morning Prayers, Memorial Church, Harvard University, 1992.

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Morning Prayers April 9, 1992

Opening hymn: no. 117 “O How Glorious, Full of Wonder” (in Harvard Hymnal)

Responsive reading: no. 43, Psalm 103:1-6

Lesson from Scripture: John 10:11-18

Phoenix is much more than a city in Arizona. Although the only phoenix in the Bible is a harbor in Crete mentioned in the Acts of Apostles, this mythical creature appears so often in religious literature of different traditions that I hope no one will call “foul play” if I make it the point of departure for today’s address. The eagle at the lectern, at least, will be glad to have a little avian company.

Everywhere, it appears, the phoenix stands out for two qualities: its uniqueness and its ability to regenerate itself. To begin with its uniqueness, the phoenix is and has always been the sole member of its species. Under normal circumstances a solitary representative of a species would be doomed to go the way of the dodo: among feathered creatures one hardly suffices for propagation. And yet the phoenix differs, because of its ability to renew itself: ever five hundred years it mounts a funeral pyre that it has constructed from frankincense, myrrh, nard, and other sweet-scented herbs. Then it turns toward the sun and immolates itself. From the ashes reemerges the phoenix, sometimes fully itself after a short spell, sometimes as a worm that becomes first a fledgling and later a mature adult.

The rejuvenatory capacity of the phoenix led interpreters to construe it as a symbol of Jesus Christ—and as an emblem of the resurrections that all good Christians can expect. The bird clammers inside a place where the stench of decay is swiftly changed to the gloriously fresh odor of a new life. More important even than its ability to resurrect itself is its power to inspire people through its agreeable fragrance. It achieves this inspiration because it satisfies the desires of the faithful to participate in a cycle of regeneration—to strip away the effects of time and to renew themselves.

In our present season all of nature—from the robins and other humble cousins of the phoenix to the crocuses and daffodils—all of nature reminds and even summons us to acknowledge and join this cycle. In the face of such beauty and grace it may seem perverse to call attention to a peril that the cycle of generation and regeneration poses. So that we do not sink into spiritual despair at our mortality and insufficiency, we must embrace the possibility for spiritual renovation that the phoenix embodies. But while rejoicing in that potential we must not allow our past failures to live on beyond the present into the future: we cannot permit a trust in renewal to

grow into a complacency, to justify excusing or continuing our vices. I think that Dante perhaps had in mind this danger of the cycle when he likened one sinner deep in the eighth circle of the inferno to a phoenix: the man was sentenced ever to be transfixed by a serpent, ever to catch fire and burn, and ever to resume his former shape from the dust (Canto 24.97-108). No one would aspire to such a fate when instead he can reach the far happier one to which the flowers and the phoenix beckon.

Closing hymn: no. 208 “Be Thou My Vision” (in Harvard Hymnal)