

## **21 February, 2016, Lent 2**

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18

Psalm 27

Philippians 3:17-4:1

Luke 13:31-35

“One thing have I asked of the Lord; one thing I seek – to behold the fair beauty of the Lord, and to seek him in his temple.” (*Ps. 27:5-6*)

I’d like to present four scenes from my life. For these to make sense, you need to know that I was raised the son of a Baptist minister, and attended Wheaton College, an Evangelical institution; and that I was an avid and enthusiastic adherent of conservative Christianity until my early 20’s.

The first scene occurs in September, at the beginning of my junior year at Wheaton, during a nocturnal walk. It was a stormy, windy night, and, with the growing realization that I was having difficulty accepting many of the religious tenets of my upbringing, the weather proved an appropriate metaphor of my mental state. Foremost was my philosophical inability to reconcile the sovereignty of a benevolent God with the simultaneous existence of evil and suffering. It has been variously called The Problem of Evil, the Problem of Suffering, or Theodicy – why a good God permits evil. Simply put, this growing sense of a contradiction and inconsistency within the Christian world view had brought me to an impasse. Throw in questions of sexuality and an evolving political sense, and I was shaken to my core, my very identity in question.

By the time this stormy walk was over, I had acknowledged that I was no longer a Christian. This avowal was at first frightening, but over time it became easier, and even pricked a nascent sense of joy in the exercise of my intellectual freedom.

The second scene occurs a little over a year later. My atheism, as I saw it, had led me to leave Wheaton and come back to the state where I had grown up in order to finish university. I was now nearing the end of my senior year at the University of Colorado in Boulder. I had taken a job as a staff-singer at St. John’s Cathedral. It was a good way to use my musical skills and be surrounded by quality music; and as far as all that religious stuff went, I had resolved just to ignore those parts of the experience. Plus, the fact that I was attending an Episcopal church I knew got under my Baptist father’s skin, so this was all to the good.

One day when I was sitting in the choir stalls, the preacher made this statement: “If **love** and **doctrine** should ever come into conflict, one of them must prevail.” Yep, I knew the answer to that one – *doctrine*. I’d heard my dad say it many times – love is an emotion, thoroughly unreliable in determining human actions. Right-belief, or doctrine, must prevail. So what was my surprise when the preacher went on to say, “If love and doctrine should ever come into conflict, *LOVE* must prevail.”

What?! This was unthinkable! No wonder my dad thought Episcopalians were wishy-washy, back-slidden, seed-on-rocky-ground, sherry-sipping shallow creatures. But the preacher’s statement opened up a tiny chink of light at the end of a tunnel – opened up another way forward for me. It demonstrated that there was a different kind of Christianity than what I was familiar with. I wasn’t sure whether it answered any more questions regarding Theodicy or the Problem of Evil. But it did more closely square with my evolving, post-Evangelical world view.

Scene Three: Four more years have passed. I am mid-way through a doctorate at the University of London. Strangely, given my continuing tendency towards atheism and the inability to reconcile the idea of a good God permitting evil and suffering, my doctoral thesis is in the field of *sacred* music. Strangely, given my continuing tendency towards atheism, I had never ceased attending church weekly. When asked to explain this dichotomy, I have been known to quip to my bemused friends the reverse of that well-known phrase, “I’m religious but not spiritual.”

One Sunday morning found me seated in the congregation of St. George’s Chapel in Windsor Castle. Having been recently plagued with a few uncertainties about my health (and my tendency towards psychosomatic exaggeration having magnified them into almost certain terminal illnesses), I was pondering the unfairness of this godless universe, and the uncertainty of life. In this gloomy state of mind, I recall asking myself with frustration, “Why am I sitting here? Why do I still come to church? I don’t believe any of this stuff and nonsense, so why do I still slavishly attend? I can’t pretend to worship something I don’t believe exists.”

I looked up at the breath-taking fan-vaulting of St. George’s, listening to Stanford’s *Te Deum* in C as it reverberated magnificently around the Gothic tracery and arches, and heard the following voice in my head: “You may not worship **God**, but you worship **Good**. There is something transcendent that you can’t explain when you enter an edifice such as this, and hear music such as this; and *that* is what you pay homage to; *that* is what you love; *that* is the Ground of your Being; *that* is God.”

Someone asked me once whether I think this was the voice of God speaking to me in St. George’s. In the traditional sense, no. But that it was some divinely-linked part of myself, or

something in my soul that yearns for transcendent meaning, or the Spirit that speaks to me through beauty, yes. Definitely yes.

So I return to the words of the Psalmist sung today by the choir – “One thing have I asked of the Lord; one thing I seek – to behold the fair beauty of the Lord, and to seek him in his temple.” And I see my 24-year-old self sitting in St. George’s Chapel, asking this one thing fervently of the Lord. That I still sought God in the temple, attending church faithfully despite an intellectual conviction that such a God did not exist, makes these words of the Psalmist resonate deeply within me. And that the thing most fervently sought by the psalmist was to behold beauty – this is confirmation that the voice I heard in my head was not a deceptive one, not an empty one.

And this leads me to the Fourth Scene, which is not really a scene at all, but the summation of some recent deliberations and ponderings. Over the 25 years since my experience in St. George’s Chapel, I have returned to that moment, and several others that have briefly parted the veil that obscures the transcendent in the mundane, to sustain me when my agnosticism threatens to overwhelm my halting faith. And recently I’ve found myself quite moved by the thought of the Incarnation – of the idea that God took on human flesh; that the Divine became mortal. I have always been more moved by, more enthusiastic about, Christmas than Easter – that is to say, the Incarnation than the Redemption. The Baptist part of my upbringing sometimes castigates myself for this; but recently I read something by William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury during World War II, who wrote that the Incarnation meant that “the personality of every man and woman is sacred.” That it was (in my paraphrase) not the cross that redeemed human kind, but the manger. This emphasis on the Incarnation as the essential moment in “the drama of salvation” is a hallmark of Anglicanism, and therefore has sometimes been called “the Anglican heresy.” But it is a concept that I have come wholeheartedly to embrace.

And I have gone further in this line of reasoning recently in thinking that the idea of God’s taking on of physical substance *hallows* that physical substance; and, therefore, that the Incarnation affirms the delight we take in earthly beauty. The duality of Platonic thought, which holds that the material world is evil and the spiritual good, is nullified by the Incarnation. And therefore beauty itself, *which is the physical world in its most perfect manifestation*, is divine. And finally, therefore, that “to behold the fair beauty of the Lord, and to seek him in his temple,” is the highest that one such as I, with all my wranglings and imperfections and doubts, can strive for in this life.

And therefore I do. I strive to behold the fair beauty of the Lord, through music and art and poetry. And I still seek him here in this temple, in the architecture and acoustics of this beautiful space. Today's Gospel concludes with the words "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." Perhaps showing up is the best thing one can do, and then just letting God see to the rest. Perhaps this regard for beauty is *my* heresy. Perhaps it is a sign of my weakness. But I hope, and even dare to **pray**, that God honor it as the best that I can do.