

15 Οκτωβρίου 2016

Saving Beauty (Fr. Stephen Freeman)

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Fyodor Dostoyevsky

“God will save the World Through Beauty”

This saying, often attributed to Fyodor Dostoevsky, never occurs in precisely this form in his novels - though the idea is present in such a strong sense that the phrase is correctly attributed to him. It is a phrase that is easily misunderstood. For Dostoevsky, in good Orthodox fashion, beauty is far more than a matter of aesthetics - it is the very goodness of creation itself.

However (and this is the great writer's genius), Dostoevsky sees beauty in strangely contradictory forms. The beauty that Dostoevsky sees as potentially salvific is itself a great mystery. In a very powerful paragraph in the *Brothers Karamazov*, the Brother, Dmitri, states the problem very clearly. Drawing on a line of poetry that says that God gave to the insects “sensual lust,” Dmitri begins by calling himself an insect and says that all the Karamazovs are insects.

I am that insect, brother, and it is said of me specially. All we Karamazovs are such insects, and, angel as you are, that insect lives in you, too, and will stir up a

tempest in your blood. Tempests, because sensual lust is a tempest worse than a tempest! Beauty is a terrible and awful thing! It is terrible because it has not been fathomed and never can be fathomed, for God sets us nothing but an enigma. Here the boundaries meet and all contradictions exist side by side. I am not a cultivated man, brother, but I've thought a lot about this. It's terrible what mysteries there are! Too many mysteries weigh men down on earth. We must solve them as we can, and try to keep a dry skin in the water. Beauty! I can't endure the thought that a man of lofty mind and heart begins with the ideal of the Theotokos (Madonna) and ends with the ideal of Sodom. What's still more awful is that a man with the ideal of Sodom in his soul does not renounce the ideal of the Madonna, and his heart may be on fire with that ideal, genuinely on fire, just as in his days of youth and innocence. Yes, man is broad, too broad, indeed. I'd have him narrower. The devil only knows what to make of it! What to the mind is shameful is beauty and nothing else to the heart. Is there beauty in Sodom? Believe me, that for the immense mass of mankind beauty is found in Sodom. Did you know that secret? The awful thing is that beauty is mysterious as well as terrible. God and the devil are fighting there and the battlefield is the heart of man."

There is no simple definition of beauty for Dostoevsky. He recognizes the contradictions within it. "I can't endure the thought that a man of lofty mind and heart begins with the ideal of the Mother of God and ends with the ideal of Sodom." He even recognizes that the man who has fallen into the clutches and bondage of the ideal of Sodom still has in his heart the ideal of the Mother of God. Such contradiction.

Dmitri Karamazov speaks of beauty as a *hunger*, a *passion*: sometimes for the Mother of God, the Madonna, sometimes for Sodom. But we are people whose heart envisions and propels us forward. This sense of passion is expressed in the Fathers as *eros*, or *desire*. Eros can be desire for God when rightly directed, or misdirected becomes the engine of our destruction.

In gospel terms, we would say that everyone has a hunger for the Kingdom of God. It is a deep hunger for the most profound relationship, for a beauty that is beyond the reckoning of this world. It is a beauty that is made manifest in forgiveness and responsibility for all and to all. It is the beauty of *suffering love*.

But Dmitri says more about this seed – this passion. He indicates that from his perspective, the madness of humanity is that it can direct its passion in either direction: the Madonna or Sodom– and even when it is in Sodom, still maintain a passion for the Madonna. There have been many examples of this in our modern world: the ugliness of the totalitarian state and yet the beauty of Shostakovitch.

In Dmitri's notions, I hear later echoes in Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*. Zhivago (whose name is itself a play on the Russian word for *life*) is both doctor and poet. Surrounded by the collapse of his world, both as a child, and later as an adult, he nevertheless has this heart and passion for life. In David Lean's movie version of the novel (which is different enough to make it almost mandatory that one read the novel), this passion for life is represented by the music of "Lara's Theme." From the moment of his mother's funeral, to the end of his life, this drive for life compels him. And like the ambiguity of Dmitri's beauty, Zhivago is able to find beauty in his marriage to Anna or in his adulterous relationship with Lara. His relationship with both is a reaching for life – despite the immorality of his life with Lara. Both he and Lara are aware of the wrongness of their situation (Sodom) but are sustained by the sheer beauty of the life they have between them (Madonna).

There is this strange contradiction and mystery to beauty within the hunger of the human heart. Dmitri expresses this with great insight: "What's awful is that beauty is not only a terrible, but also a mysterious thing. Here the devil struggles with God, and the field of battle is the human heart."

The field of battle is the human heart.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the great survivor of the Soviet Gulag and prophetic giant among the Dissidents of the Soviet Union, said much the same thing:

It was only when I lay there on rotting prison straw that I sensed within myself the first stirrings of good. Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either, but right through every human heart, and through all human hearts. This line shifts. Inside us, it oscillates with the years. Even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one small bridgehead of good is retained; and even in the best of all hearts, there remains a small corner of evil. (From Gulag Archipelago)



Beauty, whether a hunger for the Mother of God or a thirst for Sodom, are both found within the human heart. One is a true hunger, man's true end – the other a distortion, a missing of the mark.

In Orthodox teaching this is the very nature of sin. Sin is not the breaking of a law and thus the acquiring of guilt. Sin is missing the mark. Man was created, the early Fathers taught, not as an absolutely perfect being who fell from paradise – an infinite sin – worthy of an infinite guilt (and punishment). Rather man was created with a proper end. He is created without sin, with no imperfection, but he was not made at the beginning as he was to become.

St. Irenaeus of Lyons, writing in the late 2nd century, described Adam and Eve as adolescents. Their turning aside from God was a turning aside from the fullness of life in union with God that was intended for them. Thus St. Paul calls Christ, “the Second Adam.” He is the *true* Adam, the *true* man, the One who is what man was

always meant to be. As Christ will say of himself, "I am the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end." Or as St. Paul will say of Jesus, "He is the author and finisher of our faith."

In the world of Orthodox Tradition, no story captures the transformation from the distortions of passion to the pure desire of God more deeply than that of St. Mary of Egypt. Far more than an obscure story about an obscure desert saint, hers is perhaps the best known story of a woman saint in the Church (not including the Mother of God). The fifth Sunday of Great Lent is always dedicated to her. Earlier in the week, in preparation for her service on Sunday, a lengthy service of repentance is done in the Church, during which her Life, first told to the Ven. St. Zossima (another 6th century saint), is read aloud in its entirety.

She begins life (at least in her teen years) as a prostitute in Alexandria. She makes it clear that she did not do this out of necessity, but because she *liked* it. She added to this all of the debauchery and drunkenness that one might have. She admits that she often engaged in evil not for profit, but simply for the pleasure she found.

One day, hearing a party going on (or what she supposed to be a party) she followed the sound down to the wharves. There a group was gathering and preparing for a pilgrimage to Holy Jerusalem. As a lark, she decides to join them (working the price of her passage off by corrupting various young male pilgrims). Arriving in Jerusalem she goes with them to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, where Christ's true Cross was exposed for veneration, as well as his empty tomb. Coming to the doors of the Church, something like an invisible wall, prevented her from entering. She tried repeatedly but could not enter.

In a single moment she is struck with the reality of her life and the work of repentance begins. It matures over the course of a lifetime as she becomes an anchorite in the desert. By the end of her life she has lost all outward beauty. Withered by sun and heat she is almost ghost-like in her appearance. But within there is a beauty that is the glory of sainthood.

Her story is read aloud in the Orthodox Church every year. It is a model of repentance and of the forgiveness of God. The most vile prostitute becomes a most holy woman. She has abandoned false beauty and been redeemed by a beauty that is not of this world but of God. This transformation is at the heart of the Orthodox way of life. It does much to explain the more or less canonical requirement that our churches be made beautiful. (Sometimes it's a challenge if you're doing church in a warehouse, a storefront, or buildings not designed to be

used for Orthodox worship. Nonetheless buildings, like the people in them, should strive for beauty, the beauty of heaven.) It certainly is a large component in the making and veneration of icons.

In the creation story in Genesis, God looks at what He has made and says, "It is good." In the Greek translation of the passage, God looks at the world and says that it is *kalos* a word that means "good" - but also means beautiful. The Hebrew carries some sense of this as well. The goodness God sees can be described as Beauty. We can thus say with great confidence that whether God will save the world *through* Beauty, Beauty certainly will be the result of salvation.

May God make us truly beautiful with the beauty that is ours in Christ Jesus.

By Fr. Stephen Freeman

*This article appeared in [**Glory to God for All Things**](#) on October 22, 2006 and is posted here with permission.*