

Be still and know God (Fr. Stephen Freeman)

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There is a point of stillness within us, though we rarely

recognize it. We inhabit the world of our thoughts and feelings and rarely find them to be quiet. Almost nothing challenges the “normalcy” of this noisy world – almost everything we encounter is aimed towards it and markets itself with this reality in mind. Not so the gospel.

Christ consistently and persistently speaks *past* the noise in a person’s head. He addresses the point of stillness.

The noise of our thoughts and feelings is described by the fathers as “the passions.” They are the products of our inner distortions.

We do not actually “choose” most things, that is, what we acquire is not in fact a product of the will. Rather, what we experience and call “choice” is simply the work of desires – mostly for pleasure or to avoid an undesired pain. Many of the desires we experience simply “occur.” We are not at all aware of having *willed* to have them – they present themselves as *facts* within our awareness.

The same is true of many things that we say we “think.” Many of our thoughts are not rational products in any true sense. Like our desires, they often present themselves as *facts* within our awareness.

Occasionally we search through our desires and weigh them and compare them – and then prefer one over another. But this should not be confused with rational thought. It is more like shopping: which passion do I prefer?

This constellation of desires and feelings is a constant swirl within the mind. Since it consists of desires and feelings, it is extremely ineffective in guarding against outside desires and feelings. We are deeply vulnerable. Contemporary human beings are perhaps the most manipulated population in history.

It is this passionate vulnerability that we present to the world. The world, in turn, “markets itself” to that same vulnerability. Our culture maintains a rhetoric of choice and free will, but these are slogans rather than commonly experienced realities. Sadly, a great amount of popularly believed and preached theology is captive to the same slogans, engaging in an unreflective religious process.

The gospel is not a message among many. It does not compete with the noise of the market. The gospel is not information about something such that it can be compared to information about anything else. Instead:

We are begotten through the gospel (1Cor. 4:15); the gospel can be veiled from some (2 Cor. 4:3); the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ shines on us (2 Cor. 4:4); we can be obedient to the gospel (2 Cor. 9:13); the gospel is a mystery (Eph. 6:19); we can have communion in the gospel (Phil. 1:5); the gospel is not just word but power (1 Thess. 1:5). the gospel is everlasting (Rev. 14:6).

The gospel, even as words, is better thought of as *sacrament* than as rational exposition or information. It is received spiritually and transforms and saves the one who truly hears and receives it. That work of transformation does not come as a process of consideration and decisions based on information. The gospel, like the sacraments, has a power within itself that itself is transformative. The gospel, rightly presented, is Christ Himself, Christ crucified.

Any presentation of the gospel that does not require a transformation of the person, even in the very reception of the gospel, is offering a counterfeit, or a distorted version. The transformation required by the gospel is described quite clearly: *repentance* (Mk. 1:15).

The Scripture describes repentance as a “broken and contrite heart.” It is the genuine and complete apprehension of ourselves as bereft of God with the realization of our utter emptiness apart from Him. It includes the willingness to give ourselves over to God for the working of His will in our lives.

In Eastern Orthodoxy, the life of repentance is understood to be the common life of every Christian. True repentance is not an emotion, nor a desire, nor any set of feelings or thoughts. Repentance is a condition of the heart itself, a condition related to that very point of stillness within the human being.

In popular Christian culture, the meaning of repentance has been distorted. It has come to be a description of a particular set of passions, thoughts and desires. It has been translated into the language of morality and comes laden with guilt and remorse. Thus the Orthodox call to true repentance sounds like an invitation to a life of constant guilt and remorse. Who would want such a thing?

The gospel offers many powerful examples of true repentance at work. The most profound of these examples has no guilt or remorse even remotely associated with it. It is the response of the young Mary to the words of the angel: “Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it done unto me according to Thy word.” These are words of *repentance* in Orthodox understanding – indeed of *perfect* repentance. Mary is not confessing sin (the Church holds that she was without sin), and yet she makes herself lower than anything in all of creation. With such a heart, the Word could “take flesh.”

Some might argue that this confuses repentance with humility with. I am not *confusing* them – I am *equating* them: “A *humble* and *contrite* heart, Thou, O God, wilt not despise.”

The vision of the love of God given to us in the fullness of the gospel – when it is rightly apprehended – calls forth true humility and contrition. In the face of such love, I am empty. In the face of such true Being and Goodness, I am nothing. Beholding the Face of Christ, my emptiness and my nothingness do not disappear – they respond with true desire (*eros*) and open themselves to the Fullness and Being of God.

But being raised to such a Fullness does not subsequently change my emptiness and nothingness. Rather, they are sustained by the grace of God in a life of

thanksgiving (*eucharistia*). With joy the now-stilled heart hears the words of Jesus: "Apart from me you can do nothing."

The noise of our disordered desires and thoughts can never "hear" the word of the gospel. Christ's word to the passions is His word to the storm: "Peace. Be still."

Source: <http://glory2godforallthings.com/>