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A Wounded Universe (Fr. John Garvey)

Ξένες γλώσσες / In English

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Publican and the Pharisee

During a recent talk at St. Vladimir's Seminary in Crestwood, New York, Bishop Savas Zembillas, chancellor of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese, read one of my favorite Rilke poems, "Archaic Torso of Apollo." The talk was about encountering the holy in popular culture, and the poem has to do with the transforming effect art can have on us. Describing the headless statue, Rilke speaks of the power still suffusing it. Without this radiant power (I quote Stephen Mitchell's translation), this stone

> would not, from all the borders of itself,
>
> burst like a star: for here there is no place
>
> that does not see you. You must change your life.

Art can bring us to such moments, even, as Bishop Savas suggested, popular art.

The potential art has for bringing us into contact with a transformative power was so celebrated during and after the Romantic era that artists and poets were seen as a kind of secular priesthood, often juxtaposed to the older priesthoods of the churches as the possessors of genuine insight and spiritual power. Who, after all, could tell you more about reality's mysterious depths-Yeats, or the boring vicar next door?

Although the idea that art can move us into becoming better people was dealt a sharp blow by the Holocaust, when one of the most educated and artistically sophisticated cultures in the world descended into mass murder, traces of the idea remain. And it is undeniable that we can be brought to a stop by an encounter with beauty; these moments are powerful, and most of us have experienced them.

Rainer Maria Rilke

But despite the last line of Rilke's poem, despite the imperative there, we do not change our lives. We finish reading his poem, or The Brothers Karamazov, or get up from listening to Bach's Brandenburg Concertos, and stay just as we are. We are moved-and only that. It stops there. Dostoyevsky famously said, "Beauty will save the world." We feel, in a profound way, that it should, and this is what gives Rilke's poem its power. But beauty doesn't change the world, or us.

At this point it is easy to shift the talk to false gods: we are looking for art to do the gospel's work. The distressing thing, though, is that we relate in more or less the same way to our religious life. If Christianity finally has to do with transformation, if it is more than a question of membership in a church and moral behavior, we should worry. We have a way of responding to the gospel that renders it every bit as ineffective as Bach or Rilke or Matisse. We feel, as we might about our encounters with great art, that it is a good thing to belong to a church and worship there, to participate in the sacraments, to read the Bible, to say prayers on a more-or-less regular basis. We ought to do this because without it we will be less, we will be further from a truth, a state of being, that we sense is necessary to our survival as human beings.

And we aren't wrong about that. What I want to suggest, though, is that this can be in a way a protection against the very change demanded of us. We come close to the stories in the Gospels, and they warm us. We look at the father asking for his son's cure, and when Jesus speaks of faith, the father can only cry, "Help my unbelief!" We identify with that, and with the fact that Jesus cures the boy even in the absence of the faith he seems to want the father to have. We look at the publican beating his breast, and thank God that we are not like the Pharisee who looks down on him, thus inhabiting the Pharisee's own position…but we know that we are doing this, which compounds the problem. Our emotional involvement allows us to believe that we are seriously engaged with the reality of Christianity. And the churches often support us in this. It is as if simple membership in the community means that we are truly followers of Christ.

Although membership in a church is in most cases a precondition for faith, it is not the same thing as faith, which involves a risk, a profound change of heart. In this sense the evangelicals who speak of being born again have a point, although the danger is that the conversion of heart we are called to can be reduced to an emotional experience, and leave us, once more, more or less where we were to begin with.

St. John Chrysostom has a series of short prayers, one for every hour of the day. The first is, “Lord, help me to make a beginning.” How do we do that?

Perhaps what is missing from our ordinary sensibility is an awareness of the eschatological, the understanding that Christianity is finally a faith that Christ will come again; and that the wounded universe will be made what it was meant to be, for the first time, at last congruent completely with the will of God. We are too much at home in the world as it is, and don’t yearn enough for the universe as God wants it to be. Maybe we are afraid to look too much like the people who take the goofy Left Behind series seriously.

You can’t read the New Testament, though, without becoming aware that the yearning for Christ’s return pervades the Gospels, Paul’s epistles, and the first epistle of John. Part of the problem may be that we have lost the sense of the universe as itself a wounded reality. The suffering of animals, the illnesses, physical and mental, suffered by so many people, the storms that kill thousands, were traditionally seen as somehow involved with the power of sin and evil in a fallen universe; we have separated physical and moral evil, for reasons that seem sound, intellectually, but have perhaps led us to think of the world we experience as if it were the world God intended from the beginning. The story of Adam’s sin reflects a sense of something wrong that predates humanity, something primordial. Our need to be saved from this, to see everything in the universe finally liberated from bondage, is not something we hear preached very often. But it is part of the teaching of Christ. It pervades the New Testament and is present in our prayers: “Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.” When our worship lacks the sense that we receive the bread of the kingdom that is yet to come, we have moved away from an understanding essential to the meaning of the New Testament. That yearning for the kingdom, taken to heart, might be a beginning.

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