The Road by the Sea

3rd Sunday after Epiphany

January 26th, 2020

Not far from where I grew up, there was a caldera lake, one of the deepest lakes in Japan, and one of the deeper lakes on the surface of the Earth, Lake Shikotsu. In the Ainu language, this lake means “a great hollow”. In Japanese, it sounds much more sinister—like “dead bones”. In Ainu folklore, the giant *amemasu*—something between a fish and a whale—haunted the waters. It would often take the form of a beautiful woman and lure young men to their deaths. Either way, it was quite a bewitching, mysterious lake, surrounded by volcanoes and often very cloudy and cold. It was on the shores of this lake and its neighbouring lake Toya that I often heard the gospel at camps during my childhood and adolescence. When I tried to imagine Galilee as a child, I would undoubtedly think of Shikotsu. It was one of the few lakes I knew. Thus, on the shores of hollowness and dead bones, haunted by the whale fish, I first heard of the light of Christ and of the sign of Jonah.

The ministry of Jesus began along the shores of a sea, of a saltwater lake, in a land of poverty, in a time of darkness. In a dark hour of history, Christ came as a sudden light: ““Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the lake, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: ‘Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.’ From that time Jesus began to proclaim, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’” (Matthew 4:12-17).

What is darkness? Darkness is the absence of light. It is a symbol for many things: blindness, sadness, loneliness, sorrow, sickness, death, ignorance, imprisonment, injustice, sin, evil, futility, confusion, hopelessness or despair, and godlessness. All of these things Christ has overcome. And yet today, we still live as if Christ has not come and will not come again, as if the light is not burning brightly and burying the darkness day by day. In our time, we are more likely to say that God is unknowable and the universe is known, that we do not need to really know God in any detail, but that what is at hand must be examined and known thoroughly. This is a misguided reading of apophatic theology and possibly an abuse of our good science and best philosophy and theology. As Dreyfus and Spinosa remark: “Our nature is to be world disclosers. That is, by means of our equipment and coordinated practices we human beings open coherent, distinct contexts or worlds in which we perceive, feel, act, and think” (Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Spinosa, "Further Reflections on Heidegger, Technology and the Everyday," in Nikolas Kompridis, ed. *Philosophical Romanticism*, New York: Routledge, 2006, 265. Qtd. *Wikipedia,* s.v. Heideggerian terminology, referring specifically to “Disclosure”, or *Erschlossenheit*). While we do not know God as God knows Himself, God is repeatedly inviting us to know Him (1 Chronicles 16:11, 1 Chronicles 22:19, Acts 17:27, Hebrews 11:6, James 4:8, Matthew 6:33, Proverbs 8:17, Psalm 14:2, Psalm 34:10, etc., etc.), while at the same time reminding us that we know so little of the universe, its purpose, and our role in it (Job 38-41, James 4:13-16, Psalm 39:6, Proverbs 27:1, Ephesians 4:18, Hosea 4:6). One good look at our universe ought to remind us of how little we are and how little we know; what world-disclosing we do is infinitely small compared to the unknown-disclosure that simultaneously occurs. In a curt and rather humbling sentence, C.S. Lewis once said: “I have wondered before now whether the vast astronomical distances may not be God’s quarantine precautions. They prevent the spiritual infection of a fallen species from spreading” (C.S. Lewis, “Religion and Rocketry” in *The World’s Last Night and Other Essays.* San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2017. 96).

In another essay from the same book, Lewis gives eloquent expression to the darkness that defines the mystery of existence and our ignorant participation in it. In “The World’s Last Night”, he writes: “In *King Lear* (III.vii) there is a man who is such a minor character that Shakespeare has not given him even a name: he is merely ‘First Servant’. All the characters around him—Regan, Cornwall, and Edmund—have fine, long-term plans. They think they know how the story is going to end, and they are quite wrong. The servant has no such delusions. He has no notion how the play is going to go. But he understands the present scene. He sees an abomination (the blinding of old Gloucester) taking place. He will not stand it. His sword is out and pointed at his master’s breast in a moment: then Regan stabs him dead from behind. That is his whole part: eight lines all told. But if it were real life and not a play, that is the part it would be best to have acted. The doctrine of the Second Coming teaches us that we do not and cannot know when the world drama will end. The curtain may be rung down at any moment: say, before you have finished reading this paragraph. This seems to some people intolerably frustrating. So many things would be interrupted. Perhaps you were going to get married next month, perhaps you were going to get a raise next week: you may be on the verge of a great scientific discovery; you may be maturing great social and political reforms. Surely no good and wise God would be so very unreasonable as to cut all this short? Not *now,* of all moments! But we think thus because we keep on assuming that we know the play. We do not know the play. We do not even know whether we are in Act I or Act V. We do not know who are the major and who the minor characters. The Author knows. The audience, if there is an audience (if angels and archangels and all the company of heaven fill the pit and the stalls) may have an inkling. But we, never seeing the play from outside, never meeting any characters except the tiny minority who are ‘on’ in the same scenes as ourselves, wholly ignorant of the future and very imperfectly informed about the past, cannot tell at what moment the end ought to come. That it will come when it ought, we may be sure; but we waste our time in guessing when it will be. That it has a meaning we may be sure, but we cannot see it. When it is over, we may be told. We are led to expect that the Author will have something to say to each of us on the part that each of us has played. The playing it well is what matters infinitely. The doctrine of the Second Coming, then, is not to be rejected because it conflicts with our favourite modern mythology. It is, for that very reason, to be the more valued and made more frequently the subject of meditation. It is the medicine our condition especially needs” (C.S. Lewis, “The World’s Last Night” in *The World’s Last Night and other Essays*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2017. 112-114). I do not believe that we live thinking this way. I believe that we live as if we were the authors and the main actors, as if we were the stage directors and orchestra, as if we were the audience and the critics, as if we alone comprehend the great mystery of the world drama. Our day to day lives can be an open-hearted embrace of the divine mystery and trust in God’s ways, or it can be a daily, futile argument of what my tiny portion of the script says versus the entire play I have not read and cannot read. The latter is solitary confinement for eternity. It is what Sophocles called: “Dark, horror of darkness!” (*Oedipus Rex*). And Joseph Conrad called it: “The horror! The horror!” (Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*).

What is light? What, specifically, is the light of Christ? Lewis, because of or despite his rhetorical genius, left out some details. Although there is a great deal of the play we do not know, we have been blessed in a special way. The Author of the play condescended to be the main actor and was gracious enough to provide a general summary and a statement of the theme, a manual for how to play your role like the First Servant—without, hopefully, having to stab anybody or be stabbed. And this, essentially, is what the gospel is. It is the light of all those great things we celebrate in the Spirit, and which I mentioned last week—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, self-control (Galatians 5:22-25). It is the light of beatitude—the blessedness experienced by the poor, the mournful, the meek, the righteous, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, the persecuted (Matthew 5:1-12). It is the light of revelation. A greater source of wisdom and truth has broken into our world to show us things we could only barely imagine and a great many things we could never imagine. It is first and foremost, the light of Christ: “Light of Light, very God of very God” (Nicene Creed). The prophets said that this light was coming, coming to the land of Zebulun and Naphtali, down by the sea, and indeed, Jesus came to live in Capernaum, and on the shores of that sea he proclaimed the good news of who he is and what he does for humanity. Life without Christ is darkness; life with Christ and in Christ is true life itself, life lived in the Light. Christ is forever the morning of our world, the dawn of hope.

Light dawned in Galilee. What is the meaning of this light for you today? It is the world’s last night for the vigilant, for Christ has already come. And with God a day is like a thousand years and a thousand years is like a day (2 Peter 3:8). Thomas à Kempis writes: “Blessed is he who understands what it is to love Jesus…the love of creatures is deceptive and unstable; the love of Jesus is faithful and enduring” (Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ.* Tr. Leo Sherley-Price. London: Penguin, 1952. 75). Like the first disciples, like the poor of Galilee, we stand on the lakeshore, we stand in our own darkness and the shadow of death. All of us leave the same footprints in the sand, the footprints of ephemeral creatures locked in an infinite puzzle box, a labyrinthine play. And yet, the Author comes and speaks to us words of life and light; the Author calls us to play our role. In terms of physics and mathematics, our roles in the world drama seem infinitely less than eight lines, if anything at all. In the Holy Spirit, our roles may be large or small, eight lines or eighty pages, but they are of infinite value to the Infinite One who gave His life to redeem those few lines of our scripts. What will we do? The Gospel says: “As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the lake—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.’ Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him. Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people” (Matthew 4:12-23).