The Sound of Grain

October 11th, 2020

Not all paradoxes are valid. One example is a paradox of Zeno that involves grains of millet. As the *Routledge Dictionary of Philosophy* states: "The argument is that a single grain of millet makes no sound upon falling, but a thousand grains make a sound. Hence a thousand nothings become something, an absurd conclusion" (*Wikipedia,* s.v. Zeno's Paradoxes). Aristotle was one of the first to refute this. It is not a paradox as much as it is a mirage, a common philosophical, cultural, political and even religious mirage. The summary is that on your own, as an individual, you lack meaning, but when you belong to the right category or tribe, then suddenly you make a great sound. On your own, you are nothing, but together with millions of others, you are just, magnificent, glorious. Make no mistake—a field sown with thousands of grains of wheat will have a beautiful harvest compared to the field sown with one grain of wheat. The great golden field, however, does not negate the fact, the existence of that one grain of wheat that has sprouted in the other fairly barren field. A thousand non-grains do not make a golden harvest of wheat. A thousand nothings do not make something.

In the early church, there was seldom any guarantee that many Christians could gather together in one place and at one time, to create any kind of critical mass that would affect a place for a long period of time. On Pentecost there were many conversions (Acts 2), but not long after the believers were dispersed—many of them heading north to Antioch (Acts 11:19-21). Though Paul was a tireless missionary, it seems he spent many days and nights in prison, sometimes with only a guard to talk to. One might feel sorry for the guard that had to watch over the apostle. Paul was not the revival preacher with crowds of thousands. When thousands gathered for Paul—it was usually an angry mob starting a riot, not a crowd of ecstatic listeners. And this is sad, given the gloriously happy nature of his message. The great speech at the Areopagus in Athens had a small audience, and only a very few converts resulted from that oration (Acts 17). In the New Testament, the message and the messenger were important—the ethics of the message was important (1 Thessalonians 2:3), but all other practical considerations were thrown to the winds. The message was good enough to stand on its own. It needed no defense, it needed no repackaging, it needed no strategies. It merely needed good messengers, whether they preached by rivers or in prisons, whether they discoursed in rented schools or synagogues, whether they met with local officials or escaped riots in city squares, whether they were facing shipwreck or stoning, the messengers had one task, one single task. To bear their message. And it did not matter if they had to bear it alone, as they often did, even into later ages. And that message was treasure in jars of clay, one message of extreme joy—God had sent His only Son to save the world! Thus, alone in prison, writing to the Philippians, Paul says: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:4-7). This is to be burned into our minds and hearts. In the spirit of the apostle, I will read it again: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:4-7).

A long history of gravity can be traced back to the Reformation and even the Middle Ages, but our modern church has increasingly amplified this and has become addicted to an irrational degree of lamentation and brokenness. I believe this began with good intentions. I believe many believers got tired of being told they lacked faith when they got sick or that they were immoral if they struggled with some aspect of their faith, as we all struggle. They were hurt when their heartbreak was ignored or dismissed as weakness. They were exhausted from being judged for acknowledging the basic fact that life on earth can be very tragic in a fallen world. They resisted the false triumphs of salesmanship that had nothing substantial to speak to real life. Life is hard. It has always been hard. It is not going to stop being hard. There is a reason Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted" (Matthew 5:3-4). Jesus did not say, "Blessed are the poor in spirit who are so pious and virtuous they do not need joy and forsake the kingdom of heaven out of selflessness. Blessed are those who mourn and refuse comfort." Even the beatitudes conclude with "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven" (Matthew 5:12). It is not selfless to constantly lament; it is not pious to be grim and somber and to refuse the comfort and joy of faith. It is not Christ-like to wander through life in morbid fear. Fear does not heal anybody. Faithlessness does not bring anyone to faith. Christ did not suffer and die that we should be miserable. You can rejoice more than twice a year. Christ is not only with us on Easter and Christmas. Christ is risen! Christ is alive today and every day, every boring, unimportant laundry day, Christ is risen and watching you iron your shirts and fold your sheets! Christ rejoices over our salvation—why don't we?

Writing from jail, with no guarantee that he would ever see his friends again, a single grain without a thousand other grains to help him make a sound, Paul sat in the darkness of his imprisonment and painted a picture of the source and summit of existence—the very joy that is God Himself. For Paul, there was nothing that could prevent a Christian from discovering this wonder, this awesome felicity, this life-changing experience of divinity that overcame the world: "Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you" (Philippians 4:8-9). The Tokugawa government of Japan often tried to force 17th Century Christians into apostasy—they would place a *fumie,* an image of the Madonna or Christ, in front of the Christians and make them step on it. Those who refused were tortured and killed. Do not be naïve or deceived. The world wants you to step on Christ. The world wants you to embrace futility. It wants you to embrace the tragic Christ, the defeated Christ. The world wants you to believe that you are nothing without its system, that there is nothing to hope for, that you must take upon yourself an abstract guilt and horror, a quest to save an earth that allegedly cannot be saved. It wants you to abandon the one who is true, honourable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable and worthy of praise; it wants you to forget Him and stop thinking about Him. Because Christ is your joy, and joyful people are difficult to hound into submission; joyful, spiritually liberated people are more radically subversive than any other movement on the planet. One cannot conquer the joyful person, as the apostles, early Christians, and Christ their Lord demonstrated. In the Gospel, the mountain of agony becomes the mount of ascension and glory (Luke 22:39-53; Luke 24:50-53).

What is rejoicing? In the past, I have spoken of rejoicing as gratitude. I have spoken of rejoicing as the beatitudes. Rejoicing is many things. It is also *not stepping on Christ.* It is not giving into the messages of the world. It is upholding the joyous message of the gospel. What is Christ-like rejoicing? In the gospels, the parables often end in happiness—giant trees grow from tiny seeds, fields are ready for the harvest, wonderful pearls and hidden treasures are discovered, a lost coin or lost sheep is found, an unjust judge finally gives a widow justice, a net brings up a miraculous horde of fish, a generous landlord pays even latecomers a full day's wage, a disgraced and shrewd steward finds employment again through acts of mercy, the undesirables of society—the blind, lame, and poor—get invited to a great banquet. And perhaps most memorably, we see an outsider act as a first responder to a man badly beaten and robbed, saving his life. And a father forgives and reinstates a sinful, prodigal son who had wandered far away. In that list, there are seemingly insignificant things to rejoice over—a lost coin or a tiny seed that grows into a tree. And there are tremendous things to rejoice over! A life saved, a moment of reconciliation. The gospel embraces all levels of rejoicing, from the littlest to the greatest. That suggests to me that when the big picture is awful, look to the little things. Eat coffee cake and talk to the pigeons. When the little things are in disarray, remember the big picture. There are many good people in the world who are trying their best like you. And what if macrocosm and microcosm both look dismal? Then remember the One who transcends all things, who holds all things together, the greatest picture that encompasses the little and the big—God who is joy himself, who is drawing You into His eternal joy beyond the big and the little, God who loves you more than you are able to love yourself.

In the gospels, we also see instances where Christ and his disciples rejoiced. What did they rejoice over? Mary and Elizabeth rejoiced over the new life in their wombs and the hope promised through the coming births (Luke 1-2). Christ rejoiced with the newlyweds of Cana (John 2). Jesus rejoiced over Peter's confession of faith (Matthew 16:17). Jesus rejoiced over the works of healing and mercy done by the seventy-two he had sent out, but more than that, he rejoiced in the salvation they knew: "Rejoice that your names are written in heaven" (Luke 10:20). In that same moment, it says that Christ rejoiced in the Holy Spirit, giving thanks to God for revealing the secrets of heaven to the least of people on earth (Luke 10:21). Christ rejoiced in the mystery of God's work in the world. In his last discourse, on the night before he was crucified, Jesus rejoiced in the friendship of his disciples and all future followers, saying: "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete" (John 15:11). When you reread the gospels, you will find there is joy everywhere, most of it radiating from Christ, and most of it related to giving, to giving to God and to others. As Christ said: "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35). I can think of no better antidote to tyranny, nihilism and futility than the joy of the faithful because joy is imaginative and creative, determined and forceful, unpredictable and insurmountable. Joy gives where misery takes away. If you want to change the world, give joy and rejoice in Christ your Saviour!

What is one grain of millet or wheat in a world of empty fields? A lot, it turns out. There is a reason why government agencies want you to wash your boots and gear when hiking in certain areas to prevent the spread of invasive species. Once, Jesus even compared himself to a single grain of wheat, saying, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24). It is precisely through that one grain of wheat that the world is redeemed. Aristotle reminds us that even the single grain of millet makes a sound, and thus you can make a sound. Let it be the sound of joy. Let it be the praying, healing, reassuring, transforming, beckoning, nourishing, blessing sound of your joy in God, the joy that nobody can take away from you, the joy that you can give of continually forever because it is inexhaustible, welling up into eternal life (John 4). The Lord is near; may the God of peace be with you.