The Great Thought

October 28th, 2020

In the book, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North,* Matsuo Basho describes a beautiful tree that nobody notices, a chestnut tree. It makes him think of salvation. God is a lot like that chestnut tree—magnificent, beautiful and yet unnoticed by all who pass by. In the *via negativa* tradition, it is common to remember that God is not *x,* not *y,* not *z.* God is not a chestnut tree, not a chestnut, not an acorn, not a pine cone, not the brown leaves, not the cold autumn air, not the rain, not the great stars at night, *ad infinitum.* The longer one thinks this way, the less one can say about God, who says a lot about himself in 31,102 verses, or 1,189 chapters. And yet it is God who made the chestnut tree, the fallen chestnuts, the acorns, the pine cones, the brown leaves. God is the provider of your existence. Everything that you are and that you possess have their roots in God. A gigantic chestnut tree in the autumn has the task of being a gigantic chestnut tree, but it cannot do so without things like photosynthesis, chlorophyll, xanthophyll, good drainage, ample sunlight, deep soil, and the absence of blight. It is a contingent existence, much like ours. Nothing in the universe, as far as I know, can will itself into existence or exist without something else. It is this very contingency, this communion, that seems to suggest a universe designed for love.

I would like to learn how to love. There is no greater lesson to be learned. Of loving God, Jesus says, “This is the first and greatest commandment” (Matthew 22:37). It is this first commandment that we do not honor anymore, and because we do not honor it, it is likely that we do not really understand the second one, either. As Bernard of Clairvaux once wrote: “In order to love one’s neighbour with perfect justice, one must have regard to God. In other words, how can one love one’s neighbor with purity, if one does not love him in God? But it is impossible to love in God unless one loves God. It is necessary, therefore, to love God first; then one can love one’s neighbour in God” (Bernard of Clairvaux, *On Loving God.* Ed., Emero Stiegman. Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 27). One of the first things that strikes me about what Jesus says is that loving God is not an idea, it is a command. Whether it is God or your neighbour, you are commanded to love. There is no point in the rest of the law, no justice to speak of, without obeying these commandments. The entire justice system of the Hebrews and later the nation of Judah hinged on these two commandments. If I do not love my neighbour; I fail to be just. If I do not love God, I fail to be just. That is the implication. When I read the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) carefully, I am commanded to love the people who fail in love, who fail to be just—and I am to love them without compromising my own understanding of what justice is. What Jesus says is liberating, in a way; he has quietly removed the authority from the theologians, lawyers, scribes, academics, philosophers, activists, and also from you and me. Jesus has removed it and returned it to God. In our time, we do not like commands—but perhaps that is because we do not understand them. A command can be a beautiful thing. Nobody in their right mind commands something that they believe is impossible. And if the commandment is for everyone, then God believes, faithfully, patiently, lovingly—that we are capable of loving as well, that love and salvation are possible for us.

I would like more than anything to be able to love God without limit, without hesitation, without any obstacles. More than that, I would love to share with you my love for God, as imperfect as it is. I would love nothing more than that I could live the love of God in a way that others would want to love God. Life would be complete if that were the case. The gospel is this very pronouncement from Jesus—that we should love God and love one another. It sounds simple, and yet history has proved otherwise. I regret that my own life has often proved otherwise. The astrophysicist Sir James Jeans (1877-1946) once said: “The universe begins to look more like a great thought than like a great machine” (qt. in Jean Borella and Wolfgang Smith, *Rediscovering the Integral Cosmos: Physics, Metaphysics, and Vertical Causality*. Angelico Press, 2018. 2). Who is thinking this thought? Who is the one who has thought the universe? In whose thought am I living? Have you ever asked yourself that question? More importantly, have you ever asked yourself how do you love God and how do you live in His great thought? To love is to learn how to live in this great thought that God has thought. Psalm 90 says: “Lord, you have been our dwelling-place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God” (Psalm 90:1-2).

The heart should love God. A good heart mourns the frailty of our tarnished existence (Matthew 5:4), and it rejoices and gives thanks for what is good (Psalm 107:1). The heart recognizes the difference between good and evil (Isaiah 5:20), and it mourns wrongdoing while rejoicing in truth (1 Corinthians 13:6). The book Augustine wrote about his life, *The Confessions,* is easy to dismiss because of Augustine’s strange theology and his personal problems. I have sharp disagreements with Augustine; Petrarch did as well (cf. Petrarch, *Secretum*), but I appreciate the book for another reason altogether. It is a book written from the heart—an aching heart—a heart that only finds rest in God: “Our hearts find no peace until they rest in you” (*Confessions,* I.1). More importantly, the book presents his life within a prayer—finding God has transformed his life and the narration of his life into a prayer to God. Since the beginning of time, philosophers east and west have debated what exactly a soul is. Without intending to, Augustine offers another hopeful definition—our souls are narratives, stories, that only find their completion within prayer, within the greater narrative written by God: “And in your Book we read this as a presage that when our work in this life is done, we too shall rest in you in the Sabbath of eternal life, though our works are very good only because you have given us the grace to perform them” (*Confessions,* XIII.36). Our hearts respond to goodness. In the *Consolation of Philosophy*, Boethius presents the gradations of goodness and beauty as a kind of stairway that leads us up to the supreme Good that is God Himself. Our universe if full of signs, celestial and terrestrial, that proclaim the great majesty and gentle kindness of God. Though it is a debated work of philosophy rather than theology, it proclaims the beauty of the universe in one simple way—it shows us that all existence—past, present, and future—are contemplated by God—who awaits our prayers: “Hope is not placed in God in vain and prayers are not made in vain” (Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy,* V). I would argue that one could go beyond that book and say that the entire purpose and meaning of the universe is for human beings to pray to God. To love God with the heart is to seek God in such prayer.

The soul should love God. The book of Ezekiel teaches that the soul is condemned by sin to death—the soul will face judgment; it is thus connected to our moral response to God (Ezekiel 18:20). In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says: “For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?” (Matthew 16:26). And Paul’s prayer for the Thessalonians is that their souls remain in the grace of God who takes away such fears: “Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thessalonians 5:23). I should love God by keeping his commandments; I should love God by receiving His grace and entrusting my soul to His salvation. In order to love God, the soul must seek God’s redemption and salvation; the soul must have a desire, a deep longing for the eternal. August Hermann Francke once wrote: “Because the image of God has faded through the fall in man, indeed is lost, one cannot have rest in anything as long as one remains in such misery and corruption and is not made upright once again. One’s heart can never be satisfied with whatever one seeks only in this world. However, if the image of God toward which a person was initially created is awakened in him once again…then he refreshes himself and experiences how joyous and gracious the Lord is. From these words one can see how a person can find in a certain way true blessedness in this life, a true satisfaction for his soul, but not as long as he sticks with the filth of the world; it can occur only if he is converted to God from the world and from the darkness of dead works to the light of the living. Therefore it is said, ‘He who drinks of this water will never thirst and he who eats of this bread of life will nevermore hunger.’” (August Hermann Francke, *The Foretaste of Eternal Life,* in *The Pietists: Selected Writings*, Ed. Emilie Griffin and Peter C. Erb. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006. 55-56). It is easy to understand why it is hard for some to believe in God—the world is full of pain and enigma, and God Himself is surrounded in mystery that only grace and faith can open to us. What is hard to understand is how offensive God is to the godless. A God who wants to make life and redeem life, a God who wants to be with His friends for all time. Our beliefs often say more about ourselves and our dispositions than what they say about the objects of our beliefs.

The mind should love God. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus adds the word “mind” to soul—“you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” (Mark 12:30). The soul is your very being, body and spirit, and the mind seems to be the bridge between them—our brain matter that is material and our consciousness that is not material. Pierre-Simon de Laplace was one of the greatest minds of the 18th and early 19th centuries. He was called the French Newton. Though raised a devout Catholic, and at one point even destined for the priesthood, religion faded from his life. Laplace penned one of the most important books of astronomy in history— *Traité de mécanique celeste*, a work of genius. At the end of his life, he was starting to modify his views, and told his friend Jean-Frederic-Theodore Maurice that “Christianity is quite a beautiful thing”—yet on his deathbed (*Wikipedia,* s.v. Pierre-Simon de Laplace), after being complimented on his great achievements, he said, “Man follows only phantoms” (*The World of Mathematics,* Vol. 2., Ed. James R. Newman, 1960. 1324). I do not believe his achievements were phantoms, that his sentiments detract one whit from what he discovered, but I wonder if even our own discoveries, our own achievements, the fruit of our minds as we explore this universe, become obscured by dark clouds when we fail to see them by the light of God. Our apprehensions of both the material and the divine become “only phantoms”—just as the unbelieving disciples thought that Jesus was a ghost on the lake (Matthew 14:26). At any rate, Laplace received Last Rites, the *viaticum* of the faithful from the curé of the Missions Étrangères. Francisco Goya once said, “The sleep of reason produces monsters”; likewise, the sleep of faith. I will never have the knowledge or skill of Laplace, but I want to love God with my mind as much as I can. I want to fill it with wisdom and knowledge, with “whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable” (Philippians 4:8). The mind should love God.

I would like to love God with my strength. William of Rubruck, Thomas Aquinas, Francis of Assisi, J. Hudson Taylor, David Livingstone, and the Moravian missionaries who accompanied the Cherokee on the Trail of Tears—they walked hundreds and thousands of kilometres. That takes strength. It takes strength to endure your day to day work. It takes strength to carry a child in your womb. It takes strength to endure your classes at school. It takes strength to raise children. It takes strength to sleep. It takes strength to volunteer. It takes strength to ride your bicycle. It takes strength sometimes to wake up and wash your face. It takes strength to exist. It takes physical strength to endure certain kinds of conversations, certain kinds of seasons of life. And it takes strength to try to hold fast to the truth in an age that has abandoned Christ and walks in darkness, in an age when those who claim to love Christ more than others shed His teachings like the trees shedding the autumn leaves. It takes strength to carry a cross and to help someone else carry theirs. I would like to be like Simon of Cyrene, who helped Jesus carry His cross to Calvary. I would like to have the strength to carry my own cross (Matthew 10:37-39).

In this great thought, in the great thought of God, I want to be a good guest and love the host who made me and all things. Albertus Magnus once said, “Love supplies all that is wanting for our salvation; it contains abundantly every good thing, and lacks not even the presence of the supreme object of our desires. It is by love alone that we turn to God, are transformed into His likeness, and are united to Him, so that we become one spirit with Him, and receive by and from Him all our happiness: here in grace, hereafter in glory. Love can find no rest until she reposes in the full and perfect possession of the Beloved. It is by the path of love, which is charity, that God draws nigh to man, and man to God, but where charity is not found God cannot dwell. If, then, we possess charity we possess God, for ‘God is charity.’” (St. Albert the Great, *On Union with God.* Ed. P.J. Berthier, O.P. Aeterna Press, 2014. 25). I want my thoughts and my actions to conform to His great thought and His great love. I want my life within this great thought to be a prayer—a prayer of grateful reception, a prayer of supplication, a prayer of intercession, a prayer of jubilation, a prayer of benediction, a prayer of contemplation, a prayer of conversation. Only when I can love in this way will I know the meaning of justice and peace, the meaning of love itself. Only in this way will I live fully and eternally in the Majestic Glory who gave His life for me.