

The Present Void

It wasn't just Jesus who spoke in meaningful parables, and so I offer you this one by a man called Phil Harrison, a writer-filmmaker from Northern Ireland:

*The other day I had a dream. I dreamed I arrived at the gates of heaven, heavy-shut, pure oak, beveled and crafted, glinting sharp in the sunlight. St Peter stood to greet me; the big man wore brown, smile set deep against his ruddy cheeks. "You're here," he said. "I am," I said. "Great to see you--been expecting you," he smiled. "Come on in." He pushed gently against the huge door; it swung silently, creak less. I took a couple of steps forward until, at the threshold, one more step and in, I realized I wasn't alone. My friends had joined me, but they hovered behind, silently, looking on. None spoke. I realized only I could speak. I looked at them; some were Christians, some Hindus, some Buddhists, some Muslims, some Jews, some atheists. Some God knows what. I stopped, paused. A hesitant St Peter looked at me, patiently, expectantly.*

*"What about these guys?" I asked him. "My friends. Can they come?"*

*"Well, Phil," he replied, soft in the still air, "you know the rules. I'm sorry, but that's the way things are. Only the right ones."*

*I looked at him. He seemed genuinely pained by his answer. I stood, considering. What should I do? I thought about my reference points, and I thought about Jesus, the bastard, the outsider, the unacceptable, the drunkard, the fool, the heretic, the criminal, and I knew exactly where I belonged.*

*"I'll just stay here then too," I said, taking my one foot out of heaven. And I'll tell you, I'd swear I saw something like a grin break across St Peter's face, and a voice from inside whispered, "At last."*

I read this parable during my stay in Belmont Abbey a few years ago. Amidst the beauty of the monastic enclosure, the tall pine trees of Western North Carolina looming outside my window, the sounds of the Benedictine Chant still vibrating in my ears with their sublime grandeur...amidst of all this, I read this parable, and something inside of me shifted. Even now, years later, I can't fully put into words just what I experienced, and perhaps even the most beautiful words will always sound crude and brutal when trying. But, I'll try though, since we are already here. And I think I'll start with the only word that begins to make sense of my experience: God.

I experienced God in this story, for I was confronted by something much richer than myself, more profound than all of my desires and aspirations, deeper than any creed or council could ever hope to go. I put down the book and took a walk, no particular destination in mind. And as I walked, I realized I was experiencing an evaporation of sorts...of what I can only call my desire for divine bliss. The Church, throughout the ages, in various forms and in a myriad of ways, has taught us to pursue Christ for the sake of an eternal reward, a life lived with at least one eye always pointed toward heaven. But, I was left with something else. Something that has little to do with the joys of heaven, a life lived for the next life in the beyond. I was left with the earthiness of that iconoclastic, rebel Messiah who called us not to pursue him for his sake alone, but rather for the health and wellbeing of this world, with all of its scars and surprises...to see the kingdom come here and now, to meet him in the face of the outsider and the marginalized.

*The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves.*

There is something of my experience in this Gospel. The desire to escape, to leave the burdens of this world behind, only to be confronted by the throngs of people crying, with strained voices, "Hear me! See me! I hurt." So often, I retreat to monasteries that I might rest for a while in the goodness of God. But in my rest, my mind couldn't escape the cries of the world I had set aside. And I was confronted with the reality that it wasn't simply the world crying out to be seen and heard, but it was the voice of God in their cries saying, "Look not towards the beauty and the grandeur. You'll find me in the fissures, the gutters, the forgotten places of the world." And not just my mind and heart, but my eyes too couldn't escape this in-breaking. During my stay in the Abbey, I went to over 20 prayer services. I sat in the same wooden pew and stared towards the same two breathtakingly gorgeous stained glass windows. But my eyes...my eyes were pulled towards a tiny, black hole above the windows. I assume a brick once lived there, but now all that was there was an absence, a void, a memory of what once was but is no longer. And that void transfixed me, for it reminded me that even in the most sublime and beautiful experiences of God, there will always be a void, an absence. Whether it's the absence of those we have kept from entering our midst, insulating ourselves from their disruption, or the void that calls us to open our eyes and see that a misdirected love of Church over the Christ at the center can enable us to comfortably exist while the real pain of the world goes ignored...no matter what, the void is there, and more likely than not, it's where we will truly meet God.

*When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.*

All that Jesus and the apostles wanted was some rest. Just some time to go away and commune with God and one another. But God had other plans. In the cries of the world, God insisted...insisted that they face that which they sought to escape...to face reality on reality's terms...to escape not into illusion, but to dive headlong into reality. To face the void of all those forgotten and despised individuals, and in that encounter, witness the emergence of life and salvation. But not just for those healed. For Jesus and the apostles too, who found in the embrace of this dirty, dusty world something truly sacred, something truly holy and divine. Human beings seeing one another, truly seeing one another, encountering a depth in life together, becoming enriched not primarily by looking towards heaven, but by staring deeply into each other's eyes and finding God there.

I can't shake the idea that once we find ourselves preferring the abstract beauty of the face of God to the hard-lined, fleshly face of our neighbor, I'm afraid we've missed the point entirely. Then, my mind also goes to St. Paul, who in the letter to the Romans wrote: *I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit—I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh.* Though the context is different, the underlying truth is that Paul was willing to forsake his own place with Christ if it meant his Jewish family members could take his place. This kind of faith is raw, incendiary, and, if we let it, pushes us precisely where we need to go: outside of the boundaries of a Church, so that we can say with integrity that we aren't simply about preserving the legacy of our beloved churches, but first and foremost we care for the wounded in the world.

I felt a shift, not only of my position in the world but in the world itself, yet I didn't experience it as a loss. Rather, I felt free...more free than I had in ages to pursue the Christ who

is found on the outside, at the margins, in the places we dare not go, the places we hope never to go...found outside of the sanctuary, the temple, the Church...whatever name we give it.

Forsaking heaven, Jesus was thrust into this world. And the same should be said for us.

*And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.*