

More Than One Bridge

Somewhere in his writings G. K. (Chesterton, that is) speaks of “the mysticism of happiness. That is to say, the soul may be rapt out of the body not only in an agony of sorrow, or in a trance of ecstasy, but also in a paroxysm of laughter.”

(1) Chesterton undoubtedly is correct. There is more than one bridge to get to God. One may indeed, in the first place, cross over by the “agony of sorrow,” discovering with the Apostle Paul “the glory which shall be through “the sufferings of this present time.” (Ro. 8:18) This “bridge of tears” has long been the Puritans’ favorite route to the Promised Land, and I must say “sickness, trouble and sorrow,” the burden of sin and guilt, “weeping and gnashing of teeth,” do often bring us to the brink of the Kingdom, transport us rather forcefully in the general direction of God. For example, let the conscience stick or even the gallbladder start kicking where it really hurts or let some skullish fear appear to haunt us day and night – and we are likely to take prompt leave of our ordinary senses and head for higher, for holy ground, muttering “O my God, O my God, Lord God A’mighty, God, Help me!” You see, the suffering involved in guilt or pain or fear has suddenly made us theologians – at least mystics. Why, we may not have called Lord God in years, but guilt may have quite a salutary effect on the soul. Or for another example, have you ever heard anyone say, “Boy, did that evermore scare the heaven out of me!” No, of course not – quite the opposite! That may not be profane – that may well be an accurate theological description of the mystical effect of sharp, unexpected suffering. The fellow who said that may mean it scared him for a moment out of his usual flat hell of a life and gave him a shove toward the Kingdom of Heaven. Ah, the superlative power of pain in propelling us toward God! One of the meanest men I ever knew, a long-time Presbyterian, it is true, was finally converted to Christianity not by the multitude of sermons he regretably sat through – but by one terrifying pain. It literally scared the hell out of him. It scared a little heaven into him – or shoved him over into glory. So that for the first time in 20 years, he came to and told his wife he loved her. She cried. He cried. Then he actually smiled. And she smiled. And for the first time in 20 years the family could love him. You see during those seconds when he couldn’t breathe, something happened to him. His soul was, as we said at the start, quoting Chesterton, “rapt out of his body” by agony, and he crossed a bridge over into more promising land. It was a mystical experience alright, for when he came around after this attack, he was in new country, new to

him, strange and shining. It made no difference that he did not call it the Promised Land, that he just said, "I'm a different man," for he was. He said it was like – oh... being born again. He wasn't afraid, and he didn't hate anymore. It was a very peculiar sensation, he said, not living on fear and hate anymore – very peculiar sensation; it was ... how to describe it? He decided it was – indescribable – a peace that passed understanding. He said later that like Tennyson as a young man, the horses' hooves going "cloppity, cloppity, cloppity" by his window seemed to be saying to him, "property, property, property," but that since his dying (which is what he called his experience at his illness) he had discovered there was a lot else to live for besides "property, property, property." Some time later, after another seizure, one had the feeling this man did not die and go to heaven; he just died and stayed there – for he had already crossed over into Jordan. At his funeral, one had the distinct feeling that this man had not gone to meet the Christ; he had gone with him. So – far be it from me to deny that often we must learn "by what we suffer" ... Pain – that's one bridge to a more promising land.

(2) But – as I was saying – there is more than one bridge to God, to holy ground. If there is this bridge called "an agony of sorrow," there is a second one: "a trance of ecstasy." The ecstasy trance. Going to heaven on a trance – not a train – sort of swooning into glory. Now I do not doubt that many honest men have made it to higher ground, have crossed over into holy land, have been granted new insight into the nature of reality, have discovered wonder, not by the things they suffered, but by acts of worship, by disciplined devotion, so that in the whirling mystery of some divine wind, they felt shaken like a reed before a high altar of incense and candle flame or in a dark cave or desert place of aloneness with God and passed over into the Holy. For the stained glass and Gothic arches and baroque organ burpings, and muttered prayers and scriptures seem to send some of us straight to glory – and that's good, I suppose. Whereas other things put others of us into a like ecstatic state. But the Bible is right in warning against using the ecstatic as the one bridge to God. It is the route open only to special saints – not recommended for general use! It is too often sought by – oh – necromancers, dervishes and other charlatans like faith healers and demigods – not to be trusted. Crystal balls, sawdust trails pulpit thumpings – like bottled spirits may mislead one and leave one hung over something other than the Kingdom of Heaven. I don't recall our Lord hypnotizing folk into disciples. He did not put them into a swoon.

(3) The first disciples were mystics alright – they were living different lives in a land of wonder well enough. And some may have come over into this new country (1) by what they suffered, and some (2) by sudden ecstasy, but I do honestly believe in the 3rd place the main bridge they took to the Kingdom was what I would like to call the bridge of happiness.

One word describes these New Testament mystics, named Peter, Paul, and Mary, John and all the rest: they were merry. They were the joyful mystics. Now, I know, it sounds strange, even a bit heretical to say the Apostles found themselves near to God “by being extravagantly happy.” It may seem rather indelicate, even indecent, to suppose any saint “rapt out of the body in a paroxysm of laughter.” Laughter is an affront to some pious souls. How many Presbyterians have you ever seen in “a paroxysm of laughter?” Precious few. John Milton once confided to a colleague there was one thing he could not understand, and that was laughter. (Once you’ve read Milton you’ll understand.)

But I am convinced the disciples lived a special kind of laughter – and it’s not irreverent to say, I’m confident they died laughing. Certainly, if you are “in Christ” as Paul said, you ought to have a sense of humor – for he certainly did. His merry bent did those Galileans good like a medicine. He taught them not to take pompous Herods and proud Pharisees too seriously. He certainly didn’t. The only thing he took seriously was the salvation of a soul, the happiness of common men. The Galileans grinned when he took Herod off his pedestal, calling him “foxy,” and the Pharisees off theirs by saying they were guides with blindfolds on.

But he did a lot more than tickle them. You can tickle a gibbon (that’s a type of monkey) and make it giggle. Human life only looks up and laughs, however, when men and women learn how to live it. So Jesus taught them how to live it – and enabled them to live right along with him his own happy attitudes – which we call his Beatitudes. In short, they caught from him that you can’t be miserable if you’re moral. You’re bound to be one happy person if you’re humble and pure hearted and peace loving and if you’re willing to stand for the right even if it endangers your life.

Of course, as he said and proved by his cross, the lives of good and happy people, people who no longer hate and mistrust their neighbor, who don’t even hate their enemy, their lives are a source of rebuke to others who do not live as yet in such promising land, so these happy disciples of Christ are inevitably “persecuted for righteousness sake.” They’ve got to be willing

to take up that cross. Strangely enough, however, this does not take the laughter from their lives. Did not Jesus say, "No one will take your joy from you." (Jo. 16:22)

Thus Stephen died smiling under stoning – and his Christ-like way of forgiving his enemies as they killed him – first infuriated, then humiliated and finally converted a few, like Saul, who was himself later to sing in jail at midnight and die, as Paul, in the peace of God, despite the prejudice of his judges, writing to his Christian friends: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice." (Phil. 4:4)

Yes, these were, indeed, happy apostles, these early Christians – and their joy was independent of their circumstances – for – like Paul – they had learned to be content in whatever state they found themselves.

Their lives were lived in the laughter of love. "Little children, love one another." If you love, you're not afraid. In the world, but not afraid of it. And if you're not afraid, you have no one to hate, even though some will hate you. You are free, therefore. Free to laugh in the face of the devil and disaster. Free to find delight in the law of the Lord. Free to be merry in the midst of hell and high water. Free to take off your shoes, for you're on holy ground. Free to be happy. You're in the Kingdom of heaven.

No wonder their neighbors thought these disciples a bit tipsy on wine – they had never seen sober men half so glad because they had never seen men quite so good – because they had never seen men quite so close to God.

So, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

April 5, 1964