

“Good Evening”

(Lent)

Where I grew up, in a town of about 40,000, on the banks of the Chattahoochee River, “the Roaring 20’s” (into which I was born) – they didn’t roar very much. If there was any roaring around, it was across the river, over in Alabama. The Presbyterians were in control of our town, and let me tell you, they kept the “roaring” down to a nice, (South Georgia) genteel, “purring” sort of sound. On our side of the river, things were done “decently and in order” – or so I thought (when I was growing up).

I remember the evenings in particular. The evenings, they were long on our broad oak-lined streets. There was lots of time on those evenings to kick the leaves, or go out on the porch and swing, and listen to the singing of the katydids, and watch the bats and starlings whirl. When the moon was big and the stars bright, they seemed to shift places with the sun, so softly; twilight lasted deep into the night.

When folks came and went, they said, “Good evening,” and you said, “Good evening,” too. And so they seemed to me, those evenings. They seemed good, very good, to me – those deep-south eventides of my childhood, that washed in slowly over our town, cooling down the day’s heat and soothing and singing us to sleep. Deep within me, on those “good evenings,” I could feel “The world in tune.”

You see, don’t you?, that in my childhood, it was easy to believe in “Paradise,” that old Persian word for a “walled garden,” for life, my life at least, was ordered, it was good, very sweet and good, especially in the evening with the darkness coming down: it was easy to be ... “in Paradise.”

It never occurred to me, in those days, inside our walled garden, that there could be any hell roaring, at least on our side of the river.

It never once occurred to me that on a many-a-one of those same “good evenings,” old men, dying of their drinking years, running from God knows what sort of demons, set out for the other side of the river, where their sons were to go after them, muttering in their hurt with the world, “I thirst,” while their wives, who never missed prayer meeting, wrung their hands all night at home, saying a thousand times over, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do – to me!”

Nor, on these “good evenings,” did I ever once think of the sweating poor, black and white, 20,000 of them, down the back alleys of our life, trying desperately to plan, with hate and fear always on the door post, to provide a way, in ignorance, for their families, pathetic little efforts to help each other before too late: “Woman, behold your son! ... Behold your mother!” – but never being able somehow to quite manage it, death being always too quick for them, having, against all love and hope, to give up at last: “It is finished,” only deeper in debt, for a proper funeral, and the thief’s old dream: “this day (this dying day) ... Paradise?” In the meantime, there was “darkness over the whole land.”

#

Strange, on those “good evenings” in our town, as in every town, I never thought of any crucifixion. But why should I? When I was a child? “I thought as a child.” I wasn’t expected to know Christ died for dying men, much less that I was one of them. I thought ... I thought ... “the world in tune.” It’s just “when I became a man,” I no longer saw things as through an evening hour that was good.

There was pain, and there was fear, and there was sickness at the soul of men, and at eventide they crucified the life out of each other, and if you listened very closely, you could hear “weeping,” and sometimes you didn’t have to listen very closely, for it was the sound of your own voice.

Now what I am saying is this – when you grow up, when life gets down to its broken dreams, and the evenings are very, very long, and not very good – you can ... you can ... be bitter, and rail out against God as that 1st thief did – or keep a sullen silence on your tongue for you know there is no salvation in this world any more, fight for it howsoever you may, teach, labor, legislate your life away for it – there is no salvation here in our town. And you may call this realism, that you are grown up now, that your eyes are finally opened, that you dream no more childhood dreams at eventide, that life under glaring light, life at “high noon,” is a cruel and senseless fight to extinction, and that the final word on all prayers, all desires, all hopes, all noble sentiments, as well as all evil and pain and desperation is: “It is finished!”

Did you know that most suicides occur at eventide – and in warm climes? You can go that way, physically and/or mentally, if that’s the way you want it. Only remember, when it seems to you all man’s faith and hope and love lie crucified, it is only in you that it has all died. You have handicapped, crippled yourself, cut your heart out, and God pities you. If your life has

cheapened down to tawdry, if you haven't one single pleasant thought left to sleep on, if your yapping ego tortures you with jealousy, do the world a favor: don't project your ill will and vindictiveness on it. See existence in your own tortured image if you want to, burn yourself up or out in your own auto de fe if you must, but don't deny the children of God their serenity, don't deny the Puritans their serene sense of meaning in life, just because you have no quiet deeps to go on.

Upon the cross, Jesus identified with all the pain and insanity of man – all the hopes shattered, the hungers unfed – “My God, why?” he said. He was no child, no foolish dreamer, off in another walled world, no “gentle Jesus, meek and mild.” He had stirred up a revolution in this world, knew it, intended to, was facing the consequences, paying every prophet's debt, his life, for the love of God.

But the final word was not yet said. And when he said it, it was not in bitterness or ill will. It saw all, yet, kept its peace. It arose from those deeps in him that gave him serenity in the midst of chaos. It was a prayer, a simple prayer, quiet and gentle, out of his childhood. It was the prayer every Jewish mother taught her child to say, when, after the heat of a Palestinian day, the cool, good evening came. It was the twilight prayer of God's little ones, when darkness settles down. He had repeated it many and many a time. It came to him now: “Father, into thy hands, I commend my spirit...” But, that was not the end of his good-night prayer. He didn't get to finish it, for he was weary. He “bowed his head,” upon his faith, as upon a pillow, and “died.” It was sleep for him, and peace for him, and rest, after a long day's journey into night. And he was not defeated or afraid. For him, it was a very good evening, with all “the world in tune.”

Let us pray:

O Lord, before death, teach us there is no life, no creativeness, no art, no moral power, no faith to move the world, no love, no hope that lasts, unless it arises out of deep resources. Give us, from beyond ourselves, the serenity that keeps us strong and holds us steady.

Father, lest guilt and pain should cause us to lose our dreams, and the whole world seem out of tune, we commend ourselves into surer hands than our own – into thy good hands – that when evening comes for us, and we lay ourselves down to sleep, our spirits may find their rest, and we may rise to live again.

So may grace,
Mercy,
Peace – be with us –
Today and always.

May 23, 1965