

GOD WORKS IN MISCHIEVOUS WAYS

One of our friends had an old family Retainer who loved to quote scripture. One of her favorites, used to explain most anything, was: "God works in mischievous ways, his wonders to perform" The fact that was not in the Bible at all and was instead a mis-quotation from one of William Cowper's Olney Hymns, didn't bother her a bit. Sounds a bit daffy, but I doubt if it would have bothered Cowper at all either. He was usually a bit daffy himself. I like it even better than Cowper's own line (God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform"), for the child's a lot more sensible and salty, and just as biblical. She even had the right pronunciation if she had lived before 1700. So, I've thought of her re-phrasing often. For "God certainly does work in mis-chee-vious ways, his wonders to perform."

Therefore, more than once I have used her line to explain the inexplicable, especially some outlandish turn of events, the peculiar twists of fortune, the things that would be laughable if they weren't so tragic, or tragic if they were so laughable, to explain in short the whole humorous illogic of man's ill-conceived life, facing it all, exorcising it all, with that marvelously mischievous mis-quotation "God works in mis-chee-vious ways, His wonders to perform.

It is certainly the most delightful statement of that dignified doctrine of Providence I know – for it sees the humor of man's fate. To quote the _____
_____ in _____ "in all things God works for good." (Roman's 8:28a) "Well, I certainly hope so," said one of our ladies but it can only be taken with a sense of humor. For if God is at work in human history, including yours and mine, it is not only in William Cowper's "mysterious" but in little girl's downright "mischievous" ways.

For example, what do you say, how do you defend your sanity, why personal meanness masquerades as Presbyterian morality, or when civil righteousness is reduced to street riots, or when everybody screams and complains and nobody listens or helps? How do you exorcise the demon when the young die too young and the old die too old? Or when the wrong one dies and leaves the likes of us alive? Indeed, short of fatalism, how do you face the downright mischief of providence?

With laughter? Well, the wisdom writer thought it the best of medicines “might as well laugh as cry,” he says. And much truly is amusing. There’s often a wry smile in who succeeds and who survives, and especially how. We are comic, we are, or is it absurd? (the existentialist’s favorite word to use). If God works any wonders at all in us, it surely must be in mis-chee-vus” ways.

But the word “mischievous” originally had no connotation whatever of the whimsical, the laughable, the comic, and the absurd – not the way we speak of “the mischievous child” and smile. Originally, the English word “mischief” stood for no smiling matter. A “mischievous child” was not a naughty child, one cutting capers, but one who was “cruel.” Our English ancestors used the word to describe “sneaking-villainous” things, betrayal and torture – disease and pain,

It meant desperate need and rotting poverty, and any form of evil. Therefore, “mischief” was a very bad 8-letter word.

Now I know..., I know - - it takes a leap of faith (heap of faith too) to see how God works any wonders at all out of such cruel mischief as disease and pain and aging, out of need and poverty, out of villainous evil – especially if you yourself are the victim, or the villain, caught up in it. When the disease is in your throat, gut, when the pain is in your chest, when the need is at your threshold, the poverty in your kitchen, when the evil is in you. Then we cannot hold ourselves aloof, preen our fine feathers, accuse the rest and run away, or strut and laugh our usual silly laugh. Mischief, spelled with a capital “M” has us by the throat. We personify it. We say, “This is the very Mischief!” What we mean is what our early English ancestors meant: This is the very devil! For, you see, “mischief” is an old appellation for “the devil.” When we are hurting, starving, denied our animal rights, not to say our human rights, when we lie dying, when we are caught in our own pre-fabricated moral trap – we revert to more primitive (more “vitriol”) levels of speech. We say it hurts “like the very mischief,” i.e., like the devil and all his demons. Or maybe we begin to talk to the same God we’ve said we don’t believe and we use expletives -- like God-a-mighty, Lord, Lord! Oh ma God. Lordy, Lordie” Or we use that profanity we long ago substituted for our childhood prayers, and we ask God, with a new sincerity, an almost piety, to “damn” the pain, to “damn” the hurt, to “damn” the evil, and one’s self to boot, for it is fully deserved.

And it is precisely at this point that God often works “in, with and under” (to use the sacramental language) some mischief, a great wonder to perform. As though “all things really do work together for good to those who love God.”

I have often wondered at the miraculous change that sometimes comes over certain men at the point of pain –physical or moral. Some are hardened in bitterness or cruelty. But some are not. Some whose pain is physical become more corageous than they ever thought they could/would be more sensitive to other’s need. Sweeter in disposition. Some whose pain is moral seem suddenly to see themselves as St. Paul saw the magician of Cyprus – “You son of the Devil!” and set out, wonder of wonders, on a clean new course. Or some may even see themselves as John Ruskin saw the dressed-up almost corps, being carried, driven, chauffeured about the town, propped up in his carriage, being bowed and trucked to by the smirking mob, who applaud his greedy equipage, his success, but who know he is almost a corpse, and more “the mischief” he himself knows he is a soon-to-be corpse, a fashionable, envied corpse, still breathing, still staring out at the world, still that smile, that frown, but his mind is already a corpse, his heart a corpse, his spirit a corpse – dead, dead, dead

Come now, you get a roomful of such corpses together – all dressed up, still staring at the world, all sober, some still smiling or frowning, but dead, dead at heart, dead at the soul, embalmed ahead of time – a whole morgue of them and bunched up or row on row (maybe at a disco – maybe in church). And what does it do to you? It scares you. That’s what it does to you. It literally and theologically scares the living, biblical hell out of you – and you determine that from that moment on – you – God helping you – will live, all of you will live – not just your body, but your mind. You will keep your mind alive as long as you can. And your heart, your soul, your spirit, you will keep them alive too. You will not lose your humanity, your magnanimity, your belonging to and caring for the human family including your own family. You will not allow yourself to survive as a fashionable, educated, uppercultured -- well dressed corpse. As a Christian, you will join life, your life, to the life of Christ who looked at people, all people, and said “Here are my mother, my brothers, my sisters – I claim you, even if you kill me.”

Yes, it is at t his point that God often works – works in, with and under some mischief – as in the broken body and poured blood of Jesus Christ – works a great wonder, a great sacramental wonder to perform. You understand? I’m not sure.

Let us pray:

O God, remind us that times of great mischief have produced great prophets, that it has always been disease and pain, deep need and poverty, and evil which have driven the race to great reformations. So let us not be dead to challenge, but keep our minds open, our hearts warm, our lives at work, until we find our rest in Thee. This we ask through the understanding and mediation of Christ the Lord. Amen.