

"Some Imperishable Bliss"

A few minutes ago, I hung up the phone after asking a pastor's question "What's the first sign that the Lord wants me elsewhere?" & I'd answered "You wake up mornings & the joy is gone." A joy that can go, that doesn't stay, that will perish, does not qualify for, does not rise to the value-level of, what this Thinksheet is about.

1 The title-phrase of this Thinksheet is from Wallace Stevens' "Sunday Morning" (1923, stanza 5): "But in contentment I still feel / The need of some imperishable bliss." / Death is the mother of Beauty; hence from her, / Alone, shall come fulfillment of our dreams / And our desires." The first four stanzas present the hearer/reader with a woman who awakens Sunday morning in a self-contented mood, doesn't dress (except for her "peignoir" [dressing-gown]), rationalizes not going to church, & muses on the mysterious possibility of something better than the self-cocooned life she's living. IRONY: The poet, of pious background, didn't go to church either, but lived out his life in earshot of the Pacific Coast's thundering waves, yet never without doubting that he'd chosen the better part.

In spiritual value, I rate this poet up there almost to the level of Auden ("September 1939": last line, "We must love each other or die."), Eliot (whose "The Wasteland" I heard him read today on the Net), & Yates ("The Second Coming").

2 Today I commended a pastor who yesterday began a funeral, in the presence of corpse & congregation, thus: "We have gathered to celebrate the **resurrection** of Jesus Christ the Lord." In the service, which paid loving attention to memory & grief; Jesus Resurrectus surrounded death, the dead, & the dying (2Tim.1.10: "our Savior, Christ Jesus, has ended the power of death and through the gospel has revealed immortal [imperishable] life."). One fitting benediction to such a funeral would be 1Tim.1.17 (also TEV): "To the eternal King, immortal [imperishable] and invisible, the only God--to him be honor and glory forever and ever! Amen."

17x (17 times, including in the two verses above) the NT uses the Greek for "imperishable," "incorruptible," (in Trench's NT Greek synonymy) "exempt from wear and waste and final perishing." The Christmas fruit-boxes delivered to our house have printed or stamped "Perishable," not "Immortal." The Greek for "immortal" (Lat. "no-death," which also the parallel Greek means) occurs in the NT only 3x & is simply negative (e.g., as applicable "only" to God: 1Tim.6.16). (Unfortunately, NT translators do not observe the distinction, translating both Greek stems "immortal.")

Why didn't Wallace Stevens write "some immortal bliss"? Because he meant more than that thin negative can convey. To mere deathlessness, his thick negative adds that the felt need is for a "complete happiness" (Camb.Dict.Am.Eng.) unsubject to rot, decay, corruption, wearing out, wasting away--& the word is redolent with all such sad experiencing in his life, & ours.

3 Now we come to a deep pathos in the poem (which I re-read today on the Net): the poet (in the guise of the lady's whose staying home from church this Sunday morning) twice dreams of Jesus' death, & believes that his "desires" for "some imperishable bliss" have a chance for fulfillment (not in this life but) after death, does not see Jesus' resurrection (& its promise of ours) as answering his longing. Stopping short of Easter, he foregoes the Christian bliss of "eternal life" (in the NT, life beginning with joyful accepting God's gracious gift of forgiveness & never ending). The Easter answer roots not in speculation but in history, in an event, in a person, in the Person who is Lord of Life and Death; & it deals directly with the human experiences of the perishable: "Even though our physical being is gradually decaying, yet our spiritual being is renewed day after day. And this small and temporary trouble we suffer will bring us a tremendous and eternal glory [bliss], much greater than the trouble. For we fix our attention...on things that are unseen. What can be seen lasts only for a time, but what cannot be seen lasts forever" (2Cor.4.16-18 TEV). I need hardly add that this Christian bliss of Christian discipleship & destiny is not to be compared with Joseph Campbell's advice to "Follow your bliss"--a recipe for a "spirituality" as egocentric as the "self-esteem" his students had been taught earlier in their schooling.

4 Our Christian faith teaches that the *imperishable* bliss is in the "holy love" offered humanity as "eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." Love is the central & centering commandment of biblical religion, the commandment heightened & lived to the uttermost by the Savior. In this vein, the rest of this Thinksheet is what I said recently to a planning group of the UCC's Confessing Christ movement:

False diagnosis, flawed prescription. The 1st question in the planning process is WHAT IS THE SITUATION? Fellow-seminarian Clarence Jordan used to say you can't expect untrained soldiers to fight, & you can't expect the (spiritually) unborn to take training. So many in our churches are (as Jon. Edwards said of the churches of his time) "unregenerate" (Lat. for "not-again-born"). We of CC/MA need to give some answer, together, to the question.

The succeeding planning-process questions are WHAT MIGHT WE DO ABOUT IT? Then, WHICH OF THESE ACTION-POSSIBILITIES SHOULD WE ADOPT? Then, WHEN SHOULD WE EVALUATE? Then, IN LIGHT OF THE EVALUATION, WHAT ACTION? Then, HOW REVISE OUR ORIGINAL SITUATION-DEFINITION (then, a new cycle)?

I'll try this situation-definition:

1 Piety has collapsed into moralism, esp. the moralism of "social action." See Jos. Haroutunian's classic PIETY VS. MORALISM: The Passing of the New England Theology (H. Holt/32). "The longing of the medieval mind [incl. Calvin & the original N. Eng. theology] was for order and peace, and not for equality and progress" (xi). Then modernity hit, & (281) "It was the faith of the fathers ruined by the faith of their children.... But Calvinism continued to live without reason.... as a religion of unenlightened folk.... kept alive by the artificial respiration of revivalism" accompanied by "rigid legalism" & "animosity to 'free-thinking'." The new religion preached "God, freedom, and immortality" & fatuously expected it to take: "They were great optimists." The year before Hitler came to power, J.H. foresaw the outbreak of irrationalism: "The optimism and the humanism of the nineteenth century have already lost their rational quality.... It is necessary that men rediscover the truths once signified by the doctrine of divine sovereignty and divine grace, of predestination and election, of depravity and regeneration.... a post-modern [!] mind is already in the making.... In order to become religious, it must become reconciled with God" (xxv). (J.H. was a Presbyterian, a Calvinist--&, as I can testify from direct experience, a great preacher.)

2 My diagnosis is that in the mainline denominations, heart & mind are split--the former increasingly restorationist in theology, the latter modern. And my prescription can well be put in these words of Tennyson's "In memoriam": "Let knowledge grow from more to more / but more of reverence in us dwell, / that heart and mind according well / may make one music as before, / but vaster." The remedial action? Spiritual exercises that have the indirect benefit of **affectional formation**, so that intensity of loving is proportionate to "Being in general." Yes, I'm into the cultural-linguistic world of Jon. Edwards, so I'll spell it out:

3 We are called to "holy love" (UCC Statement of Faith: "He seeks in holy love to save all....").

"Virtue" is, in each instance, either natural or true, not both.

"Natural virtue" is egocentric, its affections being inverse to the distance from self. Its highest value is "self-love"--as the infant is the center of its universe. As this conviction is a disorder contrary to the order of God, this state of life is in natural-logical enmity against God, no matter the person's degree of awareness of this reality or degree of intensity of animosity.

Since public education in America engenders self-love (as "self-esteem"), our children are being taught natural virtue (if any virtue!) &, with it, necessarily, God-hatred. Affectionally, they are infantile, & alien to...

..."true virtue", the intensity of whose affections are inverse to the distance from God, who is the Most Beloved.

"True holiness" is the inward/outward condition of those whose affections are proportionate to importance of the realities within "Being in general." In those who so long, the Spirit works "true grace," including the supremacy of affection in correlation with the sovereignty of God, the world being joyfully seen as an externalization ("ad extra") of "the glory of God" (as in Edward Taylor's spiderweb poem).