

CHRIST AND UNWHOLESOME THINGS

He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

Colossians 1:17

Easter is the time of resurrection, of rebirth. The cold, deadly grip of winter eases its grasp and fair are the warm breezes which bring promise of life. What is happening visibly before our eyes is a symbol of deeper realities; the realities of our future with our Lord in the glorious resurrected state. These things are right and wholesome for us to meditate on. Easter, however, has another angle which we are invited to meditate on. This angle is that of unwholesome things; things that make us uncomfortable which we would rather not talk about. However, it is only by thinking through the unwholesome that we can fully appreciate the wholesome.

Recently my wife told me about a painter who portrayed Christ with urine splattered over the picture. I did not see the exhibit, and I did not hear any interviews where this artist defended himself. I do not know the heart of this man nor his motives. I am only vaguely familiar with the uproar this caused, and I fear that I am treading on dangerous ground just mentioning this. Allow me, my brothers and sisters who love Jesus with me, to use this episode merely as a starting point for a meditation on our Lord's incarnation and death.

I have assumed most of my life that God rules this world from without, from some distant point "out there". From our culture many of us fundamentalists and evangelicals have inherited a quasi deism which looks something like this: God is "out there" somewhere in a place called "Heaven", and out of love for this fallen world He sent His Son Jesus in the form of our humanity. Dying on the cross, He saved us from our sins, and now He is seated at the "right hand" of the Father, yet in some way the Son dwells in our heart through the Spirit. This understanding is very true as far as it goes, and it certainly does emphasize God's transcendence over nature, a doctrine we must maintain. Yet this scenario is not the whole picture. Although it acknowledges the immanence of God through the Son and the Spirit, it does not adequately consider Christ's relationship to our fallen earth now - today! Does Christ rule this earth from without, or from within?

Certainly "heaven" is not a locality as we understand localities somewhere on the outskirts of our universe from which God rules the affairs below. Likewise, God's "right hand" is not essentially a spatial concept, but a metaphor of power. Heaven is another dimension from our own; it is the realm of the spirit. But this realm intersects our own, though we humans may not all perceive this. As a matter of fact, God is as much inside our dimension as He is outside it, for He is the God who "fills heaven and earth" (Jer. 23:24). The New Testament affirms this, yet adds the further truths that it was Christ who created all things, and that "in Him all things hold together." Moreover:

For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross (Col. 1:19-20, NIV).

Paul's Christology places Christ at the center of all things here on earth. True, Christ is enthroned outside our dimension as the transcendent Lord, but He rules it from within. He is intimate with every atom of this earth. Indeed, should He withdraw His presence from any part of creation, however large or small, that part would cease to exist.

Now it is one thing to associate Christ with the beautiful things of this earth. We can see how He may uphold the flowers, sunsets, trees, and mountain streams. These things are pleasant, worthy of our Creator's attention and association. But what about the foul things of this fallen earth? Is it not the frightful truth that the Spirit of Christ who fills the fluttering wings of the butterfly, floating on the sweet scented spring air, also fills and upholds the maggot on the rotting carcass? Yes, reader, the truth is that Christ is everywhere, immanent with every dirty, disgusting, unclean thing we have ever seen, and worse things we have never seen nor could imagine.

Now for the sake of all that is holy, we must ask the question, "how can this be?" It is here where the light of the cross dawns upon our darkened souls. Luther once said that Christ was the biggest sinner that had ever lived, referring to the fact that Christ took on every sin committed by man and owned them as though he committed them Himself. But Christ on the cross also owned all the physical deformities and embarrassments of our humanity and the stench of our fallen environment. That which is so revolting to us God in Christ embraced so as to save it. He has made His peace with corruption through the death on the cross (Col. 1:20).

This is where the cross of Christ meets us every day. We perfume our rooms and clean ourselves up, avoiding as best we can the fact that corruption fills our beings, both physical and spiritual. Hygiene, of course, is important. However, our illusions that we somehow can separate ourselves from that which rots is a rejection of Christ, who reigns both forward and backward in time from that sweaty, smelly, bloody, moment on the cross. When we are confronted with that which disgusts us, and this happens every day, do not leave it and forget it without first glorifying our blessed Lord who faced the reality about ourselves - the reality which we by nature are not willing to face. We now become comfortable with a God who is not afraid to smell us.

Is not this, my friend, the essence of our religion? Is it not our Lord who taught us to wash the dirty feet? Jesus is Lord of all that is glorious and wonderful; He is also the Lord of the dirty feet! We reach union with our Lord not by avoiding that which is unpleasant, but by facing it in ourselves and in our brothers and sisters. We reach the wholesome by passing through the unwholesome, just as our Lord did. It is then we enter into the fullness of Easter.

As I mentioned in the beginning, I am not aware of the reason this artist depicted Christ the way he did with urine splattered over Him. Therefore, I cannot defend him one way or the other. It certainly is shocking. Yet our God is shocking.