

On a Level Place

Septuagesima, 2/13/2022

Happy Valentine's Eve! (Is that even a thing?) Well, whether or not it was, it is now; I've just said it. May whomever you wish would be your Valentine also wish you to be theirs. Do unto others, as they say. Happy Annual Meeting Day, as well – as you know, we schedule this event so as not to compete with any other significant days in the American cultural schedule. Nothing going on today except that it's Super Bowl Sunday and the eve of the celebration of St. Valentine: Roman, martyr, and patron saint of beekeepers and epilepsy. That must be why the day is celebrated with so many bouquets of flowers, boxes of chocolates – cacao and sugar both come from plants that flower – and certain tight-fitting or -flowing forms of evening wear in certain risqué adverts that look as though they would not keep a body all that warm – and this is February. In the Roman Catholic Church it's alright to celebrate the Feast of Valentine so long as there's nothing important going on. Being Anglicans and Episcopalians, we can do what we like – though few, even in our Communion, remember that the original Valentine was a priest, maybe a bishop, and that his toe bones, among others, grace a famous Carmelite church in Dublin – given to them by Pope Gregory XVI, no less, for some reason. The church also houses a life-size oak statue of Mary, Ireland's representation of the Black Madonna, and to Tolkien fans known, perhaps sacrilegiously, as “The Virgin Oakenshield.” The order also scored for their Dublin church the relics of St. Albert, priest and Sicilian, who apparently was good at healing and managed to get on well, as least for a Carmelite, with his Jewish neighbors. Water from his well will apparently cure what ails you. What any of this has to do with bees, epilepsy, lingerie, helmed ritual combat in the service of totem-animals, or the gospel, I have no idea.

Well, I have some idea. It begins with the word “healing”. The story begins with Jesus coming down with his people, standing with them “On a Level Place,” and doing two things: talking, and healing. They needed the healing. Sick in body, mind, and spirit, they kept reaching out to him. They knew that if they but touched his robe, power would flow out of him and make them well – and it did. He healed them all, it says. I bet that felt great. There’s nothing so satisfying as walking among people who are needy and meeting their needs, freeing them from hunger, sickness, or the ‘mind-forg’d manacles’ of ignorance, delusion, and despair. Whether you’re a physician or a teacher or in some other way pastoral and priestly, if what you do all day makes other people’s lives better, what could be better than that? Nothing, truly – but Jesus doesn’t stop at healing. He also has some things to say – words that, if put fully to work, would heal the world.

Luke writes, “He looked up at his disciples and said, ‘Blessed are you...’ but then ‘Woe to you.’” Four kinds of people he says are blessed; another four were born on a Wednesday.¹ The blessed? Those who are poor, hungry, or weeping, or who are hated on account of him –either because they follow him, or because his other followers malign them because they think he’d want them to. Those woeful? Those who are rich, full, or laughing, as well as the flattered (or the flattering); they’ve had theirs. The rest will have theirs hereafter.

Jesus’s words resemble those of a psalm, though the psalmist would personalize it: “Lord, bless me, for I am poor; my bones ache for bread, and my throat is parched for want of drink...” and, “The Lord’s woe is upon me, for I am rich with gold, one who laughs when others weep and tells people only what they want to hear.” Jesus would very much like those who follow him here to internalize his words on this matter, maybe even change what they’re doing because of them. The power that he shows among them by healing them earns him the right to tell them anything he

¹ As per the English rhyme, “...Wednesday’s child is full of woe...”
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wants to, so long as it's true. (There's never an excuse to use power like this to start telling lies.) What this passage shows he wants to tell them in this: things are not okay. It is not okay that some have while others lack. It is not okay that some cry while others make them. It is not okay that truth is bound on the scaffold while liars spin their resentments into power against all integrity and reason. Things cannot go on like this, Jesus is telling them, and we all know it. Inequalities of wealth and power, and restrictions on freedom and the ability to pursue what makes one flourish, sap the strength of any system until that it crashing down. They will hate you, Jesus says, when you point this out, for so they hated the prophets who came before you when they told people things they didn't want to hear but should have.

The Greeks had their Cassandra, cursed to speak truth, but only to people who wouldn't listen. The Israelites had Jeremiah, cursed to do the exact same thing. This morning we heard him remind his people that if they trusted in themselves alone, they'd be like shrubs left to wither in the wild, people who dwelled on the salt pans and waste places of the world. Those who trusted in the Lord, by contrast, would live in a land very much like the Home Counties (think Bilbo's Shire) in England (Jer.17:8). So far, so clear. But then he says something interesting: "the heart is devious...perverse," and bewildering (Jer.17:9). We want what we shouldn't and we crave what will hurt us, and we do not understand why. The Lord, he continues, tests us by what we want and by what we know – by what we reason, and by what we feel – and gives to each what each has deserved by what each has reasoned or felt. It's not clear, exactly, what trusting in such a Lord would mean, since he seems to leave us as much at the mercy of our own thoughts and desires as we would have been had we trusted in them, and in anything else merely mortal, in the first place. This brings me back to a question I have about Jesus's talk of blessings and woes, given there on a level place. What exactly are we meant to do with this information?

The answer, believe it or not, has much to do with why St. Valentine’s bones now rest in peace, and sometimes on display, in a Carmelite church in Dublin. The pope who put them there, Gregory XVI, had a fair bit to say about devious hearts and perverse minds, and what ought to be done about them. He also saw the dedication of martyrs like Valentine and the contemplative and missionary ways of religious orders like the Carmelites something of an antidote to what ailed the modern world – which, for him, included most of what makes it modern.

In his encyclical *Mirari vos*, promulgated in 1832, Gregory writes that it is “false and absurd, or rather mad, [to claim] that we must secure and guarantee to each one liberty of conscience”.² That is, to him, and to the French bishops and Austrian strongmen who were pressuring him, the freedom to think and act for ourselves, along with such freedoms as the right to vote, to assemble, to print and read what we wish, to learn what we wish, and to keep church and state separate, was nothing more than dangerous nonsense that would promote false truths, immorality, pederasty, nationalism, racial prejudice, religious indifference, clergy marriage, trade unions, and murder. Oh, dear. The chief targets of this encyclical were French liberal Catholics, who very much saw their faith and the values of a liberal democracy to be quite compatible. They further understood that the chief way to combat the bad things on the list I just read – prejudice, murder, nationalism, sexual abuse, and lying – was to create a society of free, well-educated, and well-formed people who could trust one another not to ruin the world and also to rein in those who wanted to.

No, said the pope and von Metternich – much as say their modern analogues in Russia, China, Hungary, North Korea, and Mar-a-Lago – what people need is to be ruled by those who have the power to rule, whether backed by a mafia, an army, a bureaucracy, or untrammled wealth. Yet Gregory differs from these voices in one important way. He understood, as I suspect they did not and do not, that a society,

² See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pope_Gregory_XVI, and: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mirari_vos.
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and hence a government, has an interest in promoting what is true and in suppressing what is not, much as it has an interest in promoting what is good and suppressing what is evil. A society, and hence a government, that is, has an interest in promoting what Jesus says will bless, and suppressing what he says will cause woe.

On this point turns the world. Perhaps the greatest difference between a just and free society is that, in it, truth is respected by those in power, and they are responsive to it. In an authoritarian regime, as in war, truth is the first casualty and a permanent enemy. Such regimes ever seek to enforce conditions by which the only ‘truth’ that matters is what the leadership says is truth, which can change by the day or the hour.

Religious institutions do immense harm when they replicate, as they often have, this mentality. Indeed, one of the chief misuses by Christian institutions of passages such as we heard from 1st Corinthians this morning is to use them to compel the faithful to believe counterfactual absurdities, and to hold as enemies anyone who does not. Nothing betrays the faith or nails more iron into the cross than churches trying to make people believe what cannot be true. It creates the moral injury that tends to obtain when people betray their intelligence, their conscience, or their God.

Power, if restrained by neither law, truth, conscience, nor duty, brings nothing but woe. It doesn’t matter whether that power comes from a gun, a wallet, an ideology, a resentment, or an idea. Unrestrained, it is dangerous. Freedom is the grace to master power and use it wisely in service of what is true and what is good. Valentine and Albert understood that. The Carmelites, and the François Poulenc who wrote a beautiful, haunting opera about them³, understood that. Gregory and his liberal opponents understood it though they differed about what it meant. Jesus, Jeremiah, and Paul understood it, too. I think that’s why Jesus came down to a level place to make his point about it in the gospel today. On a level place, you can look a person

³ See: <https://www.metopera.org/user-information/Synopses-Archive/dialogues-des-carmelites>.

in the eye as an equal, with your ears and your consciences free to listen, to accept what is true, and to deny what is not. As equals, you can freely do what truth requires and the good demands: love your neighbor as yourself, be fonts of blessing and not of woe, set each of us and all of us free from ignorance, illusion, tyranny, want, and fear. That's what our hearts, when free of deceit and malice, want. It's what our minds, when free of illusion and horror, want. It's what most everybody wants, and what everybody needs. May we make it come to be. *Amen.*