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# KING'S Theological Review

# THE BEAUTY OF HOLINESS

GRACE JANTZEN

During the past weeks of Christmas and the New Year we have all been rather bombarded with profundity, from the dignified words of lessons and carols to the sublimity of midnight mass and sober reflection about the year that is past and the year to come. But I hope it has not all been ponderous for you; that for you, as for me, there has been fun and light-heartedness. My thoughts this morning begin from nothing more solemn than finishing the last of a Christmas bird and pulling the wishbone. What did I wish? Ah, now, that would be telling; the magic only works if you keep it a secret. What would you have wished?

The idea of the wish, the secret wish above all other wishes, has long captivated human imagination, and finds its place in the fantasy and legend of the race as an archetypal image. Often the wish has a condition or a cost. The young man wishes to marry the princess but will only be permitted to do so if he slays the dragon. Cinderella wishes to be beautiful and attend the ball, and her wish is granted – but only until midnight. The cost can be staggering: Mephistopheles will give Faust whatever he desires, for the price of his soul. Sometimes the story of the wish is a story about the character of the person who makes it, as in the case of Solomon who chooses wisdom rather than long life or honours or prosperity, and because of the excellence of his choice he is given all the rest as well.

What would you or I wish for if we had the choice? Silly question, we may feel: these are fairy tales and fantasies and legends, not the real world in which one does well in a philosophy essay by working at it, not by vaguely wishing to get by. True enough; and your teachers would much prefer performance to pleasant fantasy. Yet even in the fairy tales the hero often had to work to make his wish come true; but it was the wish, the longing of the heart, that gave the wish its focus. Identifying what our real wishes and longings are is the first step to obtaining them and giving our work a direction and purpose beyond filling up the time and indulging our fluctuating whims and the expectations of other people.

The Psalmist in our reading today has worked out both what his real longing is and that he is going to have to go after it. "One thing have I desired of the Lord," he says, "that will I seek after." He knows he will have to seek; it will not come automatically or by magic, but he has identified his own real desire. And what is it? It is not, as with Solomon, wisdom to rule; it is not social justice or compassion or seeking first the kingdom of God. The thing the Psalmist wants most is "that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to enquire in his temple".

When we have finished piously nodding our heads we might do worse than to ask, "What kind of a wish is that?". Why should anyone want to spend their whole life beholding the beauty of the Lord – and, indeed, what could possibly be meant by it?

Epiphany, the season of the Church year into which we have just entered, is the season in which we think especially about the beauty of God. The story of the Magi is a story of the manifestation of the glory of God to the world. The Scriptures and Christian tradition make a great deal of the beauty and glory of God. In spite of this, I have seldom heard sermons about it, and, with the notable exception of the great work of Hans Urs von Balthasar, find not much attention paid to it in theological writing. What *is* the glory of God? When the Psalmist wants to spend his whole life gazing upon the beauty of the Lord, what does that amount to? God is good, yes, and powerful and wise and just and compassionate – but *beautiful*? We solemnly say or sing "Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be" – and if we have a certain sort of churchmanship we bow as we sing it. But what on earth do we mean? "I am the Lord: that is my name: and my glory will I not give to another," we find in our lesson from Isaiah. What does God do with all that glory?

The philosophers of ancient Greece thought a great deal about beauty as a characteristic of ultimate reality. For Plato, ultimate Reality can be characterized equally as the Form of the Good and the Form of the Beautiful: appreciation of beauty is not an optional extra but is fundamental to a true understanding of how things are. Different though Aristotle is in many respects, in this he is in agreement with Plato. God, the Unmoved Mover, does not move the worlds and all things in them by pushing them around, but rather by attracting them with his deep desirability, as a magnet attracts filings. We and all beings, when true to ourselves, long for God because of this glory: he is the supreme object of delight and desire. The Bible, too, makes much of the light and life and loveliness of God, revealed in Creation and in his tender care for all his fragile creatures. It is the vision of this glory which is represented as the ultimate happiness of humankind, the goal and fulfilment of our existence.

This is a way of thinking which we tend to find difficult to enter into. If we were asked to consider how our lives could find complete fulfilment, most of us would be unlikely to reply by saying that our deepest wish and longing is simply to see the loveliness of God. And if we were trying to identify what it is that we most hope for if there is life after death, we might think in terms of reunion with loved ones, or of peace and happiness, but few of us could honestly say that what we hope for above all is to gaze endlessly at the glory of God for all eternity. We just don't think in those terms.

Why not? I suggest that there are at least three reasons. In the first place, there is ignorance. We can hardly long for that which we know nothing about, except in an inarticulate and unfocussed sense. And we have not thought much about the glory of God, or know what we mean by it. So it is not obvious to us to long for it.

Secondly, our whole post-Enlightenment culture in the western world, the Christian church not excepted, has reinforced this ignorance by focussing far more on what we do and what we produce than on glory or beauty. Work is for productivity; art and beauty are for leisure. It is nice and pleasant, but inessential. This is also the pattern of much Christian thinking, where great emphasis is placed on social justice and doctrinal truth, and much less on the sheer wonder and delight of God. Most Christians would find it commendable if you were to give your life as Albert

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Schweitzer did to medical care for the Third World, or, like Mother Teresa of Calcutta you were to work for the poor or the ignorant or the underprivileged in the name of Christ – and these things *are* commendable, of course. But just imagine how you would have to justify yourself and meet all sorts of criticisms, even from Christians, if you decided to become a contemplative monk or nun: to desire above all to behold the beauty of the Lord, the glory of Epiphany, all the days of your life. It wouldn't even cross the minds of most of us to do that with our lives; we find the thought utterly foreign, alien to the presuppositions of the value system implicit in our society. I am not, of course, suggesting that we should all abandon our studies and rush off to convents and monasteries; I am only illustrating how much more congenial we find action than contemplation, busyness than stillness, and how our whole society is geared to value performance and achievement more than appreciation and receptivity.

There is a third reason, related to these, but more rooted in ourselves as individuals than in society as a whole. Beauty, glory, gives itself to us; there is nothing we can do to earn it or achieve it. All we can do is to open our eyes and our hearts and receive the love and loveliness of God. And this we find very hard to do. We are regularly exhorted to love: to be unselfish and generous and compassionate in our care for one another. Difficult as this may sometimes be in practice, it is at least something we can set about doing, something where we can take ourselves in hand and behave in accordance with the welfare of the other person. I would suggest, however, that receiving love is very much more difficult than giving it. To receive love, we have to open ourselves, lay down the barriers and defences that we have erected to protect our hurts and insecurities. Real love accepts us as we are; therefore to receive it we must also accept ourselves as we are. Love is the hardest of all gifts to receive. It asks of us that we abandon our control and our doing and striving, and open ourselves to the lover in trust. Indeed, in a sense we cannot even set about receiving love, generating trust. Only through the steady, persevering love of God can we learn gradually to allow the barriers to fall away, and the hurts to which we cling to be healed, and be gently loved into receiving love. And only as we do so is the love which we ourselves give a genuine love for God and our neighbour, and not a mere projection of our own insistent needs.

Now, just the same is true of the glory and beauty of God. The light and loveliness of himself is not something which we can control or generate, but which we are invited simply to receive. There is a passivity necessary for receiving his beauty, an abandoning of ourselves and our projects and activities and becoming still. Yet the passivity is not just inertia, but is an alert, attentive stillness, the attitude of contemplation. We can do nothing whatever to bring about the glory of God; it can only be received as a free gift. But we can prepare ourselves – or allow ourselves to be prepared, for in the end even this is a gift – to receive him with thankfulness and delight.

This, indeed, is the centre of the Gospel and the meaning of Epiphany – God manifesting his glory to the world, inviting all to receive it freely. "For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ." The glory and loveliness of God is not a mere prettiness, a superficial sentimentality or a decorative touch. The glory of God is best known in the face of Christ, in his compassion and joyful self-giving freedom. Ultimately the glory of God and the love of God are the same, and are manifested in Jesus Christ. This means that the glory of God is far more than an uncosting decoration; it is the love which expends itself for us in gladness and in suffering.

It follows from this that receiving the love of God, gazing upon his glory in the face of Jesus Christ, transforms our own lives and activities. It is as we are open to the compassion of that glory that our own compassion becomes beautiful rather than patronizing, and our service becomes free and joyful rather than a drudgery to ourselves and an insult to those who receive it. Holiness is insufferable unless it is beautiful; and it can only be beautiful if it proceeds from the authenticity and liberation of the glory of God rather than from our own compulsions to be good or religiously impressive. It is in the context of contemplation of the truth of God in Jesus Christ that our studies become an aspect of our worship and growth rather than selfish or sterile. This is not automatic; it requires the discipline of stillness and attention gently fostered over a long period of time until the love of God permeates us and all that we think and do.

C. S. Lewis once said that for most of us, the joys of heaven would be an acquired taste. The same is true of the glory and love of God in this life. We have to *learn* to receive it and allow ourselves to let go of our defences so that we can delight in and radiate its loveliness. Even a few minutes of daily contemplation and waiting upon God will draw us more and more deeply into his love and loveliness, and purify our intentions in the ground of our beseeching, so that we are increasingly able to receive and reflect him.

It is these who are purified in heart who shall see God, those whose longings and desires have crystallized so that they have come to terms with their longings and know that the one thing they wish for above all else, and seek after in singleness of mind, is to behold the beauty of the Lord in the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

To whom be all glory and majesty, wonder and worship, now and always.

**NOTE**

1. A sermon given at the Opening of Term Service, Wednesday, 8th January, 1986, at King's College, London (KQC).