

THE MIRROR

HEART – MIND – SOUL – STRENGTH. What an amazing notion, that we can live any moment of any day with all four of these in harmony, in balance – all working and flowing together like friends and teammates. Being rich or famous pales to insignificance beside such a prospect. But the thought of living one’s life loving God with all four of these dimensions operative and in full cooperation ... well, Don Quixote’s “impossible dream” would become an established fact long before that happened. It is an image of devastating beauty, and it reminds us how far we are from the Kingdom. It also reminds us, I hope, that Jesus believes this to be our true destiny – eventually.

HEART – MIND – SOUL – STRENGTH. It is disconcerting to realize that at least some of the time, instead of using these powers together, we actually pit one of them against the others. Sometimes we use mind to belittle strength – we use it as an excuse for *not* going into action. We use heart as a defense against mind, claiming our feelings or sentiments are authentic enough to override any need for thinking. Sometimes we try to claim that the record of our behavior or the use of our strength is proof enough of our worth and we don’t need to worry about soul – we don’t need a personal relationship with the Christ. Jesus thinks we need all four, working together, to worship God aright. Yet we keep trying to start wars between them? We treat them as adversaries?

Even within any one of these four categories, of course, humans are able to make mayhem instead of progress. The heart devoted to self instead of God will quickly lead us astray, heading into desires and sentimentalities that take us further and further from the Kingdom. The soul can serve evil as well as good. Once committed to a falsehood, it can commit atrocities that shock the other three, claiming – in the name of humanity, or a master-race, or the good of the whole, or the will of God – that any means and any cruelty are okay because of the righteous goal. It is hard to get used to the fact that anything with potential for good has equal potential for evil. Sometimes it’s wonderful to realize that anything with potential for evil has equal potential for good.

Does it seem like we have jumped into the deep end of the pool this morning? Anything that raises hope as much as Easter does is bound to raise questions. And I want to address a couple of questions today.

But first I want to remind you that truth is more than an answer to a question. Some answers – even good ones – can be used to stop the pilgrimage instead of to enhance it.

Sometimes we use questions not as part of our search for truth, but as a way to distance ourselves from belief and commitment, as if we have a right to stand aloof and demand that somebody answer all our questions to our satisfaction before we deign to participate in life. Yes, and sometimes we ask questions with no intention of searching for the answers ourselves. The life of the mind is supposed to be a pilgrimage toward truth and wisdom. But if we are not true seekers, no answer, however authentic, will do us any good.

The *Tao Te Ching* sums it up nicely: “Those who know do not say. Those who say do not know.” I guess that puts me in my place. In any case, many of us discover, as we walk the Christian WAY, that our notions about which questions are really profound begin to shift and change. Questions we used to think were easy, get hard. And questions we used to think were deep and unanswerable are really quite simple. **Why is there evil?** People are rebellious. **Why does God allow evil to continue?** If there is no free will – no choice – there is no character, no love, no meaning. **What is the meaning of life?** To love and serve God, and maybe even come to care about some of the rest of his children. The deep, profound questions are easy to answer. We like to try to complicate the answers – to get out from under some of their light. But these are not the hard questions. Some *really* profound questions are: What can I do today to please my God? What change can I make in my life this afternoon that will further the Kingdom? How can I be more supportive of my friend Richard? How can I bring true joy to my family? Those are profound questions. Such questions do not have easy answers. And their answers enlist all of ourselves – heart, mind, soul, and strength – or we have no answers. There are armchair philosophers, but there are no armchair Christians. That would be a contradiction of categories.

Before we got too big for our britches, what was the Judeo-Christian answer to world hunger? Every father should teach his son a trade, and raise him to be a responsible member of the community. How naïve. Everybody knows today that the answer is charity – vast programs of nonpersonal charity. And the more we use it, the worse the problems become. Therefore we know this must be the right answer.

Fix everything from the outside. Never mind the individual, or his character, worth, growth, faith, or principles. Why am I reminded of the Sorcerer's Apprentice? Never mind ...

Some of you were musing last week on "How do we *know* He lives?" (Meaning, Jesus and His Resurrection.) Nobody needs somebody else's answer to this question. I have no intention of trying to answer it. But what about perspective? There are some profound answers to this question, but the question is not profound. How do you know *anybody* lives? Mostly it's hearsay, and taking other people's word for it. You tell me you have an uncle or a boss or a wife, and I figure you know and I take your word for it. You have some experience of this person. In my case, I have a lot more experience of Jesus being alive than I have for some of *you* being alive. But that is my experience. Experience is interesting but nontransferable, unless another has had the same sort of experience. If you ask me about my wife or children, do I give you an academic answer? Do I try to prove that they exist? If you're really interested, I might show you a picture or tell you some stories about them. But if you don't want to believe they exist, fine with me. I'm too busy trying to deal with them to want to spend much time on asinine theories that have nothing to do with reality. Those are just avoidance games.

So now I want to get serious – meaning, personal. Why do we try to keep God at arm's length by trying to act profound and academic? Why such resistance? Why such an insistence on stronger and stronger empirical proof? Don't you realize that if you took the same approach to your wife or husband, your children, or your friends, there would never be time for love or relationship? Don't you see the game? "Make me believe – I dare you!" Oh, people do play the same game on the human level at times: "Make me believe that you love me." And it always destroys the relationship. Objectivity is not relational. It destroys any relationship, whether it's with your dog, with your children, with your friends, with your spouse ... or with God. (Subjectivity is relational – warmth, caring, affection, commitment.) We live in an age that keeps trying to say, "I love you, but it's nothing personal."

This kind of idiocy is how we ace ourselves out of catching the gentle messages of God and the caring presence – the Spirit's hints, suggestions, quiet influence, comfort, guidance, strength. We try to insist that if we aren't straight-armed or hit on the side of the head

with a two-by-four, then we won't pay attention – we won't admit that we are getting any personal attention (help, solace, love) from God.

Christ came, dramatically, to help us to trust, awaken to, and become aware of the Spirit's presence within. Do you think or imagine that the Spirit was not present in the world before Jesus came? Do you "hear" the first chapter of John's Gospel? (Or Paul or the Book of Hebrews or church history or the Old Testament?) What made Abraham leave Ur? What woke Samuel in the middle of the night? What told Jeremiah that a New Covenant was coming – six hundred years before Jesus was born? The Spirit has always been present, but most humans will pay it no mind, just like today. However, there is far less excuse now. Why did the Christ come so caringly, lovingly, painfully – demonstrating the true mind and heart of God? And saying to the followers: "I am going away from you now, no longer to be among you as a physical being. But I will come as Counselor, Paraclete, Holy Spirit – to be with you always." That was supposed to be a hint: In former times, you didn't know. Now you know – you *can* know – you are *supposed* to know. "And now you know what I'm really like, so you can trust me. Spend some time listening for my influence, staying aware of my presence. *Every* time food or drink passes your lips, remember ME!" Do we think communion is just some dumb ritual for the objective, institutional church? In the name of God ...

And why does the Christ come so gently? Because there can be no "shouting," no two-by-four to the head, no straight-arming. Oh, we tease about how dramatic it sometimes gets when we are listening with all our might – going open and receptive and obedient – and how strange are some of the changes that it brings. But God never forces it. That would take away free will, turn us into puppets, ruin the very purpose of it all. It's not true that God talked more to Jesus. What *is* true is that Jesus listened (and obeyed). Forty days and nights ... all night in prayer ... over and over. We don't have the time; Jesus took the time. Jesus thought communicating with God was really important. That's the difference.

So get used to it! We must be willing to seek the quiet, inner influence – or miss the New WAY. You are *already getting* all the Spirit's influence and communication you are ever going to get! Not all the messages yet to come, but the messages *are* already coming. They have been coming to you all your life. Get attentive and appreciative. That's the difference. Dare to trust the quiet, inner voice. It is quite dramatic

enough ... if we listen, acknowledge, and obey. We want the answer to be God talking louder – God shouting at us. But the answer is that we learn to listen more carefully – and trust what we hear – when we are truly willing and ready to trust and hear and obey.

There is a second item. Several of you have been commenting and questioning lately (again): Why do bad things happen to good people? It is not a very profound question, but it is profoundly emotional. The real truth, I think, is that we don't like to see people suffer, especially friends and loved ones. It is a *heart* question, and most of us have learned that we cannot answer *heart* questions with *mind* answers. We can *think* about the Crucifixion, and learn profound and wondrous things. But if the heart goes there, it is broken, and changed forever.

So I am aware (more than you might think) of how limited the thoughts I want to present to you are. Nevertheless, in their own way, they are helpful to me. If they help any of you, I will be satisfied.

Do you remember Jesus' parable about the wheat and the weeds? And the cryptic remark that Jesus didn't do many mighty works or miracles there? He had a bad day. The people were shielded against Him. They shut themselves off from the wonder and the love. Imagine that: They shut themselves off from the wonder and the love. Do I find myself there reflected? They shut themselves off from the wonder and the love.

But let's get to it: There is a reality about where we live – this planet on which we exist for a few years. THIS IS NOT THE KINGDOM. And though we can live *for* the Kingdom here and experience something of the ways of the Kingdom here, yet this is not a realm in harmony, in tune, and in cooperation with God. Sometimes I have teased you, saying, "Where do you think we are?!" It's important to remember that this is not Heaven. Sometimes we complain, have expectations, and feel judgment as if this *were* Heaven and we have the right to demand full justice and perfection here. We quickly get brutal – to ourselves and to each other – if we forget where we are.

I hope you will track that with me – or indulge me, if you prefer – for just a little bit. I want to ask you: Have you ever looked in a mirror? What did you see? Was it absolute perfection, or did you notice some flaws?

THE MIRROR

Now, don't get too philosophical on me just yet. Never mind the character, the persona, the soul you may see looking back at you from the mirror. The physical image is all we will talk about for the moment. Whether truly beautiful or physically ugly, everybody I have ever known looks in the mirror and realizes that the image looking back is not perfect. Whether the flaws are major or minor, they are there. What do we learn from that? It is an imperfect world. God did not make us perfect. We claim that God is omniscient, all-powerful, perfectly loving. Yet God did not make us perfect. Why do some people keep acting all through their years here as if this were some kind of brand-new revelation, some kind of surprise? Have they never looked in a mirror?

Now, if the face looking back at you in the mirror is not perfect, what about the rest of you? Do you have perfect kidneys, a perfect heart, perfect lymph glands, perfect feet? Is it possible that you have hidden flaws which will cause you some problems, under certain circumstances, that other people you know will never have to deal with? Is it possible that your knees might not hold up as well as those of your brother or your friends? Maybe you can do exactly the same thing as your next-door neighbor but you will have a heart attack and he won't. Or he will turn out to be an alcoholic and you won't. Or she will have an affair and you won't. Or she will have terrible migraine headaches and you won't.

What do you see when you look in the mirror? Were you born perfect, or are there flaws? And if you can see the flaws – even in the mirror, even looking only at your face – what do you *learn* from that? What do you *know* from that? There are weaknesses inherent in your makeup. Weaknesses are in everybody else's makeup too. Some of them are easy to spot; some of them show up under stress or pressure. The longer you live, the more likely it is that more and more of them will show up. In the end, you will not survive them all. Where do you think you are?!

It has never been part of the reality – never part of the bargain – that God was creating us perfect and putting us into a perfect realm. Not only that but, given a few years, we start to deteriorate. We ache and groan more all the time. Voices once beautiful begin to crack and lose their tone more and more. Bone and muscle that once laughed at weights and tricky terrain, and even high mountains, must slowly learn to be more and more careful. God did not promise to give us perfect

bodies here. It was never in the contract. Have you ever looked in a mirror? Look and learn!

And if the body is not perfect, what about the mind? What about the psyche? What about anything and everything created in this imperfect, broken world? Are you really sure that some people have it good – that they were handed easy lives? And that others have terrible burdens with no joy or purpose possible? Stick around. Keep paying attention. Maybe you don't know the whole story yet.

We all have friends, loved ones – sometimes very dearly loved ones – who get sick with some dread disease. Over and over people come to me and say: How could God let this happen? My friend/mate/child is such a wonderful person. How could God let them be stricken with this terrible disease? And I have to wonder: Have you never looked in a mirror? We all carry flaws. Some of them are obvious, and some of them are hidden. Sometimes we carry flaws within us for years and no serious issues arise from them. But they are still there. It just takes the right circumstances, the wrong timing, or some context that sets it up, and then we're in trouble. Life has not suddenly changed; it has always been this way. God did not build this place to last. God does not *want* this place to last. And certainly God does not want us to have to endure this place for very long. Have you never looked in a mirror?

We “put the best face on it” we can. We learn as much as we can, as quickly as we can. We do as much good as we are able, and we get as aware of the larger picture – the true issues, the meaning and purpose of life – as we are able. And then we're out of here. Don't we know that yet? Have we never looked in a mirror? “*Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth.*” Never imagine that Jesus was unrealistic. People who base their purposes and importance in this world are the real dreamers – the Pollyanna optimists, the escapists, the masters of fantasy and illusion. Jesus was the most hard-nosed, pragmatic realist who ever walked this planet. That's why He said, “*Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth.*” Live for God. Do not just “get a life” – get an eternal life. This one is not going to last.

So, do you think Jesus' parable is only about good guys versus bad guys? That some of us are all good, and lots of others out there are all bad? Some of the weeds are on the inside. And don't you know there is an enemy in the picture? Satan loves to play on our weaknesses, and seems watchful for every opportunity to do so. He is perfectly willing

to do any damage that he can. He doesn't have to win the whole show on any given day. He is happy to take away any joy, faith, effectiveness, love, and productivity that he can, whenever he can. Some people are willing to let him, and are even eager to cooperate.

On the other hand, every day we are alive here is a miracle. Every day anyone we love is alive and healthy and happy here, it is a miracle. There is no final success here, only temporary effectiveness. Every day is a new challenge and a new opportunity to live for our Lord. Never again will we encounter tragedy, illness, cruelty, or failure and be surprised. We have looked in the mirror. This realm is laced with flaws. If there is no eternal life, then this world is a sad and meaningless affair. Two percent of the billions who live here ever experience the opportunities, the resources, and the comfort that we take for granted, yet how many days do we live without bitter complaint? Never mind feeling guilty – let's use what we have for the Kingdom in any way we can.

Look in the mirror and learn. God is wonderful. You are invited into LIFE. So is everyone else. You are given incredible gifts and possibilities, and the joy and love and adventure here are incredible. But perfection was never part of the bargain – not here. This is a realm of flaws. And sometimes they catch us by surprise, and we get sick or sad or debilitated or dead before we thought we were going to. So do those around us. Of course we mourn. God does too, even though God knows it's only temporary. But though we mourn, it does not lead us into despair. We do not feel singled out for special punishment. Everybody else can look in the mirror too. God still loves us, and there is another, better realm. This one is only for teaching us the basics – for getting us started so we have some concept of what will be required in the next realm. So even staying faithful and cheerful in the midst of calamity is part of who we are and what we are here to learn. To every calamity, every shock, every surprise – whether we love it or hate it – we have one constant response and reply: GET CAUGHT BEING FAITHFUL.

Keep looking in the mirror. God makes many wonderful promises. He never breaks them. We only make it unbearable for ourselves when we pretend that God made promises that he never made in the first place. And God *does* promise to give us perfect bodies. But not here, not yet. First we have to learn how to deal with this one with all the flaws. It is one of the great principles: *“You have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much.”*