

Love and its Disciplines:

Paul's Letters, Dante's Purgatory

Introduction

“...I bear your witness that, if possible, you would have plucked out your eyes and given them to me.” (Galatians 4:15)

Just before making this claim, Paul writes that a “bodily ailment” impelled him to preach the gospel to the Galatians in the first place. In the twelfth chapter of his second letter to the Corinthians, he speaks of a “thorn in the flesh” that God, despite Paul’s supplications, refused to remove. “My power is made perfect in (your) weakness,” came the response. In the tenth chapter of the same letter, Paul quotes what the Corinthians say about him in his absence: “His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak...” Near the end of the letter to the Galatians, he notes that he is signing this letter himself, as attested by his characteristically “large letters.” Finally, Luke tells us, in the ninth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, that the appearance of the risen Christ to Paul rendered him blind for a time.

What are we to make of these references to Paul’s physical condition? What, precisely, is the “thorn in the flesh” that afflicts him? Why is his “bodily presence” perceived as “weak”? Why does he write in large letters?

Many have speculated about Paul's affliction. Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan argue for malaria, very common in the swampy climate of his native Tarsus. Others believe a seizure disorder vexed him.

But the quotation which begins this introduction casts doubt on these explanations. A claim so striking, even unnerving, can't be only a metaphor. It speaks to us directly from the depths of Paul's own suffering. Paul is talking, literally, about his eyes. Luke says that after Paul was baptized, "something like scales fell from his eyes." His encounter with the risen Christ did not leave him permanently blind. It's not unreasonable, though, to believe that he emerged from this transforming experience with a permanent visual impairment. The angel with whom he wrestled wrenched Jacob's hip from its socket, and the patriarch walked thenceforth with a limp. In similar fashion, Paul may have been able to see, but not well, after Christ's appearance to him.

A visual impairment would account for the "large letters" of Paul's handwriting. It also explains his unimpressive, even contemptible, "bodily presence." On the pockmarked streets of Roman cities, without the aid of modern optometry and assistive technology, Paul would have needed someone to guide him, on whose arm he could lean. The Galatians at first overlooked Paul's impairment. In fact, they welcomed Paul as an "angel of God," perhaps believing his limited vision was mystically conjoined with deep spiritual insight, and did not "scorn or

despise” him. Later, though, an group of opportunistic “false apostles” came to Galatia. They called Paul’s authority into question, probably by portraying his “weakness” as a sign of God’s disfavor. Their arguments turned the hearts of the Galatians against the one who had brought them the gospel.

For Paul, though, his “weakness” indicated authority, not the lack thereof. With Paul, as with the Biblical witness throughout, nothing worthwhile can be gained without sacrifice. At the cost of partial loss of eyesight, God heightened the acuity of his spiritual perception. Paul’s partial blindness bears witness, in his mind, to the authenticity of his apostolic call, because it reveals the price he paid for clarity of spiritual vision. The Galatians once saw things this way too, and would have compensated him for his loss with their own eyes, had they been able to do so. It grieves Paul that their view of him has changed.

Spiritual sight lies at the root of the Christian gospel. I learned this from former Virginia Seminary homiletics professor Milton Crum. He labored mightily to teach us that good sermons identify ways of seeing things, “sin perceptions”, that lead to sinful feelings and actions, and “gospel perceptions”, ways of seeing things that generate virtuous feeling and behavior. We students struggled to understand Professor Crum’s doctrine. Surely it sufficed, we thought, to condemn destructive emotions like anger or envy, and the destructive actions associated with them, and to encourage our hearers both to feel love and compassion for others, and to act on these feelings.

But it does not suffice. Only a clear and precise delineation of a “sin perception”, a destructive mode of spiritual sight, moves us to seek the gospel. And only clarity and precision in the portrayal of a “gospel perception” – a way of seeing the world as God sees it – sets us free for the exercise of compassion.

Paul’s own experience helps us to understand spiritual sight. In his life and work as a Pharisee, he saw human righteousness as the condition for God’s love and favor. He recognized his own former self in the Galatians. Under the influence of the “false apostles” whose ministry followed Paul’s, they turned their gaze away from God’s unearned grace and back to their own righteousness. Paul identified the behavioral fruits of this way of seeing things: “strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy...” (Gal 5:20-21).

In the fourth chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul identifies the gospel antidote to this “sin perception”: “What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?” When we see whatever we have as belonging to us by right, that is, as the just reward of our own righteousness, we fall readily into the sins Paul enumerated for the Galatians. But if we see all things – including our own talents and capacities – as gifts, then our “gospel perception” leads us to the practice of the virtues of gratitude: “...love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control...” (Gal 5:22-23).

Nearly thirteen centuries after Paul lived and died, the Florentine poet Dante Alighieri took up his theme of spiritual vision. While still living, he undertook a rigorous journey through the stages of the Christian afterlife. Meeting the souls that populate hell, purgatory¹⁾ and heaven, Dante comes to recognize the roots of his own sinfulness, and God cleanses his spiritual sight. The Dante scholar Irma Brandeis calls the *Comedy* (Dante's own title for the poetic recounting of his journey; the adjective *Divine* was added after Dante's death by the poet Boccaccio) a "ladder of vision", which Dante climbs step by step.

The masterful translator and interpreter of Dante, Dorothy Sayers, writes of the *Inferno*, the first canticle of the *Comedy*, "If you insist on having your own way, you will get it. Hell is the enjoyment of your own way for ever." But we will be bereft of the illusions and rationalizations that disguise "our own way" and make it seem other than it is. "This is what you chose to do? This is what you chose to think? Well, this is what it is (and) there are no changes now." Thus the equally masterful Charles Williams, friend and colleague of Sayers, describing the union of the evil that happens on earth with the same evil unmasked and fixed before the sinner's eyes in Hell (*The Figure of Beatrice*, page 142).

The unmasking persists in *Purgatory*, but the pilgrims there embrace it. They see themselves and their besetting sins clearly, enduring discomfiting truths as a means of purification. This purification entails a clear view of self, but also of others.

Falling asleep on the second night of his ascent, Dante dreams of the Siren. Sayers explains, "... (S)he is at first sight unattractive; she only acquires strength and beauty from Dante's own gaze. She is, therefore, the projection upon the outer world of something in the mind: the soul, falling in love with itself, perceives other people and things, not as they are, but as wish-fulfillments of its own: i.e. its love for them is not love for a 'true other' ... but a devouring egotistical fantasy, by absorption in which the personality rots away into illusion." Williams makes a similar point, using his characteristic vocabulary of "the Images", by which he means created things in their essential being as images of God: "(The soul) must cease to know the Images as *it* chooses; it must know them as they are; that is, as God chose them to be; that is, it must (in its degree) know them as God knows them..." (*The Figure of Beatrice*, page 146)

Note Sayers's emphasis on sight and perception; note, too, that we could substitute "see" for "know" in the parallel passage from Williams without altering his meaning. Each phase of the purgatorial journey helps the penitent see self and other more clearly. The means of purification is to endure the sin as it is, practice the opposing virtue, or both. Thus the proud walk the circuit of their cornice with heavy stones fastened to their backs. "The eyes that looked down upon their neighbours are now unable to look up," Sayers writes. The slothful, on their cornice, engage in ceaseless activity. Thus they come to perceive clearly

the toxic indifference with which they have regarded matters that demand, but have not received, their best efforts.

In the end, Purgatory is a happy place. Dante's arrival on the sacred mount is hailed by the appearance of Venus, "quickener of love", and the awakening of the muses. Rightly so.

Embracing the rigorous means necessary to cleanse their inward vision and see self and others clearly, the pilgrim souls open themselves to the renewed hope of genuine love. At the summit, they have become

"...like trees by change of calendars

Renewed with new-sprung foliage through and through,

Pure and prepared to leap up to the stars." (*i.e., ascend to Paradise*)

When we think of Paul, an instantaneous transformation comes to mind, not a protracted journey of purification. In a single moment on the Damascus Road, in the twinkling of an eye, Paul was changed. We divide his life into the way he saw things before his "conversion", and the way he saw them afterward.

But Dante too, in a moment, was changed, and his own instantaneous transformation both reflects and illuminates Paul's. Looking back on a time long before he began his otherworldly journey, he writes: "In that part of the book of my mind before which there would be little to read is found a

chapter heading which says, ‘Here begins the new life.’”

Dante’s words here refer to his first encounter with Beatrice Portinari, when he was nine and she was eight. At this moment, he records, “...the vital spirit, the one that dwells in the most secret chamber of the heart, began to tremble...; and trembling, it spoke these words: ‘Here is a god stronger than I, who shall come to rule over me.’”

These quotations come from Dante’s first work, *La Vita Nuova* (the new life). Boccaccio reports that in his later years Dante was “much ashamed of having made this little book.” (Charles Williams notes, in *The Figure of Beatrice*, that “...(t)his is likely (true); Shakespeare at the time of *King Lear* probably had no great opinion of *Romeo and Juliet*.”) We might call it an overheated chronicle of puppy love and, later, adolescent infatuation. Further, the adult Dante was married (relatively happily, as far as we know) to Gemma Donati, not Beatrice Portinari, and they had four children with her. But we, like the older Dante himself, should be careful lest our “mature wisdom” take us where we do not wish to go: “(In the appearing of Beatrice to the young Dante), (a) kind of perfection...appeared on the streets of Florence; something like the glory of God...walking down the street towards him. It appears that this is an experience which has occurred to a large number of young people besides Dante. Their elders do not encourage them to believe that the phenomenon is what it seems; the causes of their elders’ hesitation are many, and some of them at any rate are

exhibited in the ditches of the *Inferno* or (if they are fortunate) on the terraces of the *Purgatorio*.” (*The Figure of Beatrice*, page 21)

His first encounters with Beatrice changed Dante as surely as the Damascus road experience changed Paul. His life and writings exemplified what Williams called the “Way of Affirmation”: every stage of love has its own reality, its own function and its own integrity. Each stage points beyond itself, but none is to be discounted. We feel the fire of this first love throughout Dante’s writings, but especially in the *Purgatory*.

Williams calls *Purgatory* “this mount of recollection”. The pilgrim souls, remembering the events of their earthly lives, see them now both in their own reality and integrity, but also as they point beyond themselves. Thus the trembling of Dante’s heart before the child Beatrice foreshadowed his trembling before the mature Beatrice at the summit of *Purgatory* (we’ll consider this encounter in detail in the first reflection), which in turn anticipated his holy fear before the throne of God itself.

Paul had no Beatrice. He tells us several times that he is not married. Indeed, the zeal for Pharasaic righteousness of which he boasts in second Corinthians, or his singular focus on carrying the gospel to the known world, left little time, energy or inclination for any sort of what we would call a “personal relationship,” let alone romance or marriage. Knowing this, might we say that the risen Christ is his first love? His response to Christ’s appearance resembles Dante’s to Beatrice: “Here is a

god stronger than I, who shall come to rule over me.” In a similar vein, he writes that upon knowing Christ, it is no longer he, Paul, who lives, but Christ who lives in him: like many lovers, he yearns to lose himself in the beloved. He tells the Galatians that he bears the marks of Christ’s passion on his own body – as we might wear a piece of jewelry given us by a lover, or even have his or her name tattooed on our bodies. And with the Corinthians he refers to himself in the third person in order to report a mystical experience: “I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago; whether in the body I do not know, or whether out of the body I do not know, God knows; such a one was caught up to the third heaven. And I know such a man; whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows; how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.” Might these “inexpressible words” be tender and intimate assurances of love from Christ to Paul?

We don’t know, of course, and we cannot know, because Paul did not divulge the details of his inner life as Dante, writing in a time and place radically different from those that shaped Paul, did so readily and fluently. But the “Way of Affirmation” teaches us that each love is, simultaneously, distinct, and related to, every other love. Dante fell in love with Beatrice, and Paul with Christ. Their experiences are more similar than different. The journeys they subsequently undertook aren’t that different, either. Paul’s relationships with the churches he founded or

nurtured were, in some sense, his Purgatory. The Pauline scholar Johan Christiaan Beker makes a distinction between “core” and “contingency” in Paul’s writings. The “core” is the new way of seeing things given to Paul, once for all, in his encounter with Christ: “What do we have that was not given to us?” “Contingency” refers to Paul’s interpretation of this “core” gospel for the varying circumstances and issues that the different churches present to him. Through his contingent interpretations Paul worked out the practical implications of his new vision for his ministry.

In 1964, the Lutheran bishop and student of Paul Krister Stendahl published a landmark essay, “Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West”. He argues persuasively that neither Paul nor his culture were given to self-examination. Thus Paul’s correspondence with his churches – his contingent interpretations – reflect very little concern on Paul’s part about his motives, faith or faithfulness. In this sense, his journey and Dante’s differ. Dante undertook his journey through the afterlife in conscious pursuit of self-knowledge, contrition and repentance. Paul looked outward.

Still, his outward focus reveals something of his inner life. He came to self-recognition in his relationships with the communities he admonished, encouraged, and worried about. Sometimes he shares his self-recognition with us, perhaps without meaning to do so.

So Paul and Dante, each climbed the “ladder of vision”, discovering the full meaning of that “first love” which shaped their way of seeing things from the very moment their hearts were kindled. Put more simply: each man fell in love in an instant, but it took long and rigorous journeys for them to see clearly both what love demands, and what love offers.

Some of us are more like Paul: outward-focused, perhaps even “extroverts” or “problem solvers”. We learn and grow through action, applying our “core” convictions to the world’s “contingencies”, revising and reformulating them as circumstances demand. Others share Dante’s introspective bent. We keep close track of our internal response to what we see and experience. Most of us feel draw to both sensibilities at different times in our lives. Dante himself was a man of action as well as contemplation; he and his family suffered a lengthy exile from Florence because of his political activities there, and he probably wrote part of the *Comedy* during this time. And Paul’s several imprisonments brought temporary ends to his restless activity; he used them to “contemplate”, to formulate responses to various problems and issues in his churches.

Most importantly, we all have “first loves”. I use the plural intentionally, because “first loves” can occur many times, in different stages and contexts, in a single human life.

These “first loves” bestow, all at once, a way of seeing the world. But we don’t grasp the full implications of the vision

right away. Instead, as the intensity of the moment fades, we embark on a journey. In its course we undergo disciplines, like Paul's in his apostolic ministry and Dante's in his climb. The purpose of these disciplines is to cleanse and clarify our spiritual sight, so that the soul loves a "real other" and not a mere projection of itself. The journey may or may not include marriage, to a first or second or third "first love"; it always includes estrangement and reconciliation, in many different forms.

In the reflections that follow, we'll consider the meanings of several brief quotations from Paul's letters with regard to Paul's first love and ours, Paul's pilgrimage and ours. The reflections rely especially on Dante's *Purgatory* and the writings of Dante commentators, but also on the insights of others, to further our understanding.

1) The Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England condemn the doctrine of Purgatory, but this position reflects a time when officials extracted contributions to the church with promises of release from Purgatory for departed loved ones. Ecclesiastical functionaries allegedly told the faithful: "For every coin that in coffer rings, another soul from Purgatory springs."

This corruption betrayed the consoling essence of the idea of Purgatory: that after death, our journey continues. We come to terms with who we are and have been, and prepare to meet the Almighty face to face.