

1069. LISTENING TO NOTHING

My wife and I are sitting on the deck of our cabin surrounded by evergreens trees, at our rain forest hide away on the west coast of Canada. I say to Jenny:” Do you hear that?” She says: “ I don’t hear anything.” “Exactly.” I reply. What we hear is the sound of silence. We are listening to nothing.

The absence of city noise is the most relaxing part of our vacation. It allows us to empty our hearts and minds from anything we have to do. As we sit in silence for a long time some things begin to present themselves to our awareness. Out of nothing some things appear: the soft shush-shush of the wind through the trees, the cry of a bird far away, our own breathing, and what feels like a intrusion, the noise of a car down the road. Individual things insist that we pay attention to them when previously we hardly noticed them in passing. They speak to us with authority when we are silent and listen.

Gradually we become aware that we inhabit a world full of things, people, creatures who demand our attention, who are real, who expect us to respect their existence. Most of them are not things that we have made. They are given to us and motivate us to respond one way or another. That is their authority in our lives.

It is important for us human beings to listen, to sit in silence before we act, before we speak, before we think even, to let ourselves be told by the things, the creatures around us who reveal themselves to us. Much more than that, we are invited by them to wonder at their substance and to marvel at their beauty. From birth on children know in their bones what we lose as we get older, that the beginning of wisdom is not so much rationality as our capacity to marvel and to be amazed.

When things speak to us, when things reveal themselves to us with authority we quite naturally wonder who their author is. If most of the things of the world we live in are not thought up by us, are not fictions, are not made up by us, are not fabrications, who or what then made these thing to be? That is the question of origins, of where things come from. It is a tantalizingly difficult puzzle that has occupied the best minds throughout the ages, difficult because one can imagine another origin behind every origin, another author behind every author of the things of our world. To make sense of our world we have to start somewhere, which for us implies a leap of faith. What was the decisive event, who spoke the decisive word that called the world we live in, including we ourselves, into being and what or who keeps it going?

Many answers to that question have been given. One of them we find in the bible, the Christian scriptures. They clearly identify God as the author of all that exists. I am not competent to judge whether or not He is. Ultimately I have to accept his existence in my life in faith or reject that in doubt. But God qualifies as one of the contenders for the source of all that is, seeing that the bible identifies him as an author, as *the* author, who merely by speaking is said to have brought forth the being and becoming of our world and who, again by speaking provides for its continued preservation.

Whispers of the heart about God

One biblical poem that connects God to the things of our world is found in psalm 19. It was written by a shepherd boy, David, whom God called his friend. He was an Israeli poet who wrote many of the psalms in the bible and who later became an Israeli king.

Palm 19 is a poem, a song, a meditation, or as the Jerusalem Bible has it a “whispering of the heart” about God. It must be read, recited and sung with reverence and humility rather than theologically dissected and debated with pride. Poetry and song, whispers of the heart can often reveal things about God where theology can only stutter. That is the case here.

Neither is Ps. 19 a lecture on physics or astronomy. It talks about the heavens and the skies and the sun, yes, but it is not about any of these in the universe. Ps. 19 is about God and the way the heavens and the earth and the planets, and in particular the sun, reveal His glory. It tells us that the universe itself is a poem, a song, a symphony about the greatness and majesty of God. Space whispers to us, with a loud voice so to speak, who God is and what He does, and that He is awesome.

Of course, you can look at the heavens during the day and see nothing but blue or cloudy skies. And you can look at the moon and the stars at night and see nothing but planets whirling in endless space. But that is like watching Niagara Falls and seeing nothing more than a whole lot of water coming down. You miss seeing what the heavens and the planets are clearly showing you, telling you, declaring loudly and unmistakably that the creator of everything is an awesome God. So, says Psalm 19.

It is not a debate about whether God is real. It's not about whether or not he is visibly there. It's not about whether he can be seen. It's about whether *we* see him or not. What would it take for us to see what David saw when he wrote this sonnet about God and the universe?

If it is true, like so many believe today, that perception is reality, so that only what can be seen or heard or perceived is real, then what gives birth to perception, to seeing and hearing? What is it that opens our eyes and our ears so that we can see, so that we can hear? I submit to you that the birthmother of seeing and hearing is love. You cannot see, you cannot hear what you do not love. Love opens our eyes and our ears to perceive what is really there.

I will give three examples: Have you ever met a man and you took an instant disliking to him? He is loud and he brags and he complains and he dresses like a slob. Your first impression is that he is not a nice person. Then you meet his girlfriend or his wife, and you notice how *she* looks at him. It's look of pure adoration. She is clearly head over heels in love with him. And that makes you wonder whether your first impression was the right one. Maybe he is not such a bad guy after all?

Second example: Maybe it is a guy thing, but in my experience not all babies are cute. Some babies are butt ugly. And when you see one of them you go “ewe” inside. Then you see how its mother looks at that baby. She clearly loves that baby to bits and she fusses over it and tells that baby that it is beautiful over and over again. And you wonder, what does she see that I am missing?

The last example is taken from the bible, how God himself sees his people Israel, a nation of people whom the bible describes as a cantankerous lot. And yet God loves them like no other. He calls Israel Jeshurun, a term of endearment which means something like “my sweet little baby” (Is. 44:2) and “Hephzibah.” which means, “My delight is in her.” (Is. 62: 4) God’s love for Israel is the love of a father. In Hosea 11 God says: “ When Israel was a child I loved him.” (1) It was I who taught Ephraim to walk.” (3) “I led him with cords of human kindness and with ties of love.” (4). And as the father of a wayward child God cries out to her in agony: “ How can I give you up, Ephraim, hand you over, Israel?” (8) My heart is changed within me, all my compassion is aroused” (8) And then He vows, “As a mother comforts her child so will I comfort you (Is. 66: 13) This is clearly the language of passionate love by a God who is crazy about human beings. To him Israel is precious. He sees in Israel something that we cannot see. They say that love is blind, but don’t you believe it. Love opens our eyes to see what is really there.

Back to our question: What would it take for us to see what David saw when he wrote this sonnet about God and the universe? The answer is, a passionate love for God. If anything is clear from all that David has written in the psalms it is that he was intoxicated, totally besotted with God, and that made it possible for him to see God in everything.

But why is love so important for seeing the world aright, including God? Well, when you love someone you want to learn more about him or her. So, you’ll spend a lot of time with them, you take the time to get to know them better, to get to know them personally, intimately, more fully. In the eyes of the lover the beloved takes on substance and depth. But only after a long time of being alone together with him or her.

If there was anything that David the shepherd boy had in abundance, it was time. As the sheep he was watching were grazing around him he would lie on his back for days on end, looking at the skies and marveling, dreaming, meditating, composing, whispering songs about the greatness of God in creation. If you want to love God in order to see God in the world, then you cannot do this on the run. You need to take the time to look at, to listen to nothing.

Implied in Psalm 19 is the assertion that when we see God in everything the world opens up to us as well. Instead of looking at the universe in black and white, we will be allowed to see it in blazing technicolour.

Look at the marvelous picture David paints for us of the sun in the skies in his poem. He has God stretching out the heavens like a painter stretches canvas over a frame. Then

God places a tent in one corner of the canvas, at the place of the dawn of the day. And he then has the sun coming out of that tent like a bridegroom.

So, picture this: It is the day following the night after the wedding, the day after honeymoon night, it is the morning after a night of tender and riotous love making with his beloved, a night that no viagra ad can ever hope to be able to describe.

Early in the morning the bridegroom has come out of his tent. The beloved is still sleeping. And he stands there and he remembers, and he stretches, full love and energy. Life is so good! And he wants to run for joy, because he is so happy. He wants to run all day, all the way from dawn to the other end of the canvas at the end of the day!

Not a very scientific picture of the sun? Probably not. Breaks all the rules of physics? Probably. And theologically not very appropriate? Well, maybe not. But then, psalm 19 is not a physics or a theology lecture. It's a poem, it's a song, a whispering of the heart, a testimony to the greatness of God in the universe by looking at the skies for a long, long time.