

“ONE AND ONLY NOBLE TREE”

Sing, my tongue, the glorious battle,
sing the ending of the fray;
Now above the cross, the trophy
sound the loud triumphant lay:
Tell how Christ, the world’s Redeemer,
as a victim won the day.

We often sing that ancient hymn on Maundy Thursday, the *Pange, lingua, gloriosi*, written in the year 569 by Venantius Fortunatus, In a little while we will sing selected stanzas of the hymn again, including that most beautiful one which says,

Faithful cross! Above all other,
one and only noble tree!
None in foliage, none in blossom,
none in fruit thy peer may be!
Sweetest wood and sweetest iron!
sweetest weight is hung on thee.

This hymn, which in the original has eleven stanzas in all, makes a connection in an earlier part between the “one and only noble tree” on which our Lord died, and the other tree that stands at the beginning of the biblical story, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil of which our first parents partook:

God in pity saw us fallen,
shamed and sunk in misery
When we fell on earth by tasting
fruit of the forbidden tree:
Then another tree was chosen
which the world from death should free.

These two trees are most intimately connected—the one stands for our sin, the other for our redemption. The one for our death; the other for our life. “As in Adam all die,” wrote St. Paul, “even so in Christ shall all be made alive.” John Henry Newman in another great hymn wrote:

O loving wisdom of our God!
when all was sin and shame,
A second Adam to the fight
and to the rescue came.
O wisest love that flesh and blood
which did in Adam fail,

Should strive afresh against the foe,
should strive and should prevail.

One of the most powerful contemporary sermons I know of is the sermon/poem that Davie Napier wrote about Genesis chapter three. It is written as a monologue spoken by Adam. For the most part it consists of a smart-aleck, wise-cracking Adam complaining about existence (“This is the garden, Lord? This little plot, this existential prison?”), lamenting his confusion (“Where, O Lord, am I? If this is east, then east of what or whom?”), or registering his downright rebellion (“So you can take it, Lord, and keep it, Lord. I did not ask you, great I AM, for Eden.”), sentiments which all of us have uttered one time or another, though perhaps less explicitly and less provocatively. Then there is a ditty about the forbidden tree and the delicious temptation, a description of the fall and the subsequent meeting with God in the cool of the day. Confronted by God with his offense Adam remains obstinate:

You give us all creation, to be sure—
then shake a disembodied godly finger
in our face about a special tree.
Well, God Almighty, if you are almighty
let us be free of you—or let us die!

That is the very essence of all sin. You can hear its echo in the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche and countless others. At the end, the words of God’s curse are recorded, “And I will greatly multiply your pain . . .,” and Adam responds,

This is a fine romance. A fine romance
this is. A beautiful relationship—
the Potter and his animated clay;
the Father and his independent son—
a beautiful relationship is fractured
for nothing but a silly little tree.

For you, an empty, loveless, lonely garden;
for me, frustrated, unfulfilled existence.
Congratulations, God and Man. Well done.

It is a dark humor, and tragic because true. We, you and I, were utterly undone by Adam’s vile deed, and cannot much complain because we continue it still.

That is not the end however. There is this final soliloquy, but the mood, the tone have changed:

Sweet Eve, you say you thought you heard him laugh?
 I heard him say, "*How can I give you up?*
How can I hand you over?" [Hosea 11:8] Then a word
 about another silly little tree—
 an antidotal tree, redemptive tree.
 And then—this must be when you thought he laughed—
 I think I heard him sob.

I think he wept.

It is only when we see the cross of Jesus Christ from the perspective of human sin, sin in which we have been actively involved and of which we are truly culpable, can we view it aright. If we view the crucifixion as a sad tragedy, as though Jesus were the unfortunate victim of some ancient injustice in which we had no part, if we deny that the rabble cry, "Crucify! Crucify!" is ours as well, we will never know the balm of the cross, Adam (*Adam*, the Hebrew word for 'man') . . . Adam is us.

There was medieval legends which traced the wood of the cross back through Jewish history to the Garden of Eden. One such myth related by Sabine Baring-Gould says that as Adam lay dying, he sent Seth back to the garden to request a balsam of the guarding angel which might relieve his death agonies, and Seth was given three seeds from the Tree of Life which he was instructed to place in Adam's mouth at his burial. In the course of time, three trees grew, a cedar, a cypress and a pine, which later merged into a single tree trunk and became the noblest tree of all Lebanon. Later Solomon had the tree cut down to use in his palace, but it proved unworkable, was discarded, and later buried where the Pool of Bethesda was dug, giving the pool miraculous properties. When the time of the crucifixion drew near, it rose to the surface of the pool, where it was found by the executioners for Jesus' cross. The story is purest legend, of course, but, nevertheless, was spun with perceptive theological instincts—for this "one and only noble tree" upon which the blood of Christ was shed is truly the antidotal tree whose fruit reverses that ancient and enduring wrong. The one tree, the tree of our disobedience, expelled us from God's presence. The other brings us back to him again. The one tree spells death, the other life. One is law and one is grace. One reveals God's wrath, the

other his love. Oh bless that noble tree, the antidotal, redemptive tree, the tree of God's love and of our salvation, the blessed tree on which our Lord did die.

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Sermon preached by the Rev'd Fr. Voris G. Brookshire on Good Friday, April 10, 2009, at the Anglican Catholic Church of Saint John the Theologian, Pompano Beach, FL. Copyright © 2009.