

A Case for Tentativeness

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[Matthew 11:1–6]

Oscar Hammerstein once noted that “Too many people become too certain about too many things too soon in their lives, and they lack both the wisdom and the knowledge to expose their hastily adopted ideas to further doubts and reflections.” He added: “In these immature absolutists lies the seed of tragedy.” This malady arises in no small measure from our fear of ambiguity, our inability to live with a question mark. With the blind man in John’s gospel we want to cry out, “One thing I know.” Like the angry Jews who turned on Jesus long ago, we demand “tell us plainly.” We have a deep-seated craving for clarity. There are ministers who decry any fluted rendition of the faith, who are quick to quote: “If the trumpet give forth an uncertain sound, who will order himself to battle?” (I Cor. 14:8). In matters of the faith they lay claim to a “blessed assurance.” Such an attitude may well be intimidating to those who have a less certified postulation of the faith, who agonize over a slow maturation of thought and experience, whose spirit would be that of John Henry Newman’s hymn, “Lead, Kindly Light”:

I do not ask to see the distant scene; One step enough for me.

Is it not time to raise the question; What price certainty? Is it as important as we have pretended? Is not the search for it often an evasion of the insecurities that are inevitable in growth, an attempt to freeze the map of life at a given stage? The desire and need for new experience and venture is just as basic to life as the craving for security and certainty. Indeed, a part of the boredom of our age arises from our attempt to bleach the spirit of adventure out of life.

To be sure, our religious tradition has organized itself historically around some great certainties, and we would be spiritually adrift without them. Moreover, a quest for order, coherence, and unity in the midst of the clamorous irrationality of our world is a legitimate enterprise. Yet in matters of religion, a quest for assurance can grow into a shell of dogmatism that deprives us of further growth. Hard and fast conclusions may be comfortable if our experience of reality is relatively static.

Built into the very structure of life is an element of tentativeness, and to recognize this need not issue in shallowness, intellectual laziness, or naivete. Tentativeness is our disposition to accept the provisional nature of reality, to reconsider a position, to receive new information, and to reformulate ideas. It arises out of the frank recognition that in all of life there is the dimension of the unknowable, the mysterious, and the unpredictable. Even our Lord himself was not insulated from this fact, for before he selected his disciples he spent all night in thoughtful petition to the Father and then chose Judas Iscariot.

I have had many occasions to recall G. K. Chesterton’s remark, “The troublesome thing about life is not that it is rational or irrational; it is almost rational.” Just when we

think we have everything nailed down, something breaks through thought, experience, and language, and escapes. That person who said “the literalists are the real liars” knew something about reality. There are certain parts of life to which we have to respond as a poet, not as a dead literalist. That is why we always need the poet, the dramatist, the artist, and the musician. In this technological age we need to recover again the virility of the imagination, lest we settle for that frost of fact by which we give correctly stated death to all that lives.

Why do we mortals always want to cut everything down to manageable size? We seek to make faith strong by a willful blindness to all that denies it, to turn the questions around to fit the paltry answers we can find, to serve up the nostalgic clichés of a vanished pietism. A great English writer reminds us, “Always leave an altar in your heart to the unknown God.” There is often a thin line between what we deem settled conviction and premature closure.

I often want to say to people, “Don’t let anyone define revelation for you, lest your God be too small.” Think of all of the ways the Word of the Lord has been spoken, acted, lived, sung, celebrated, and recorded. The old patriarchs struggled manfully at the awful edge of mortal mystery to hammer out the strong shape of the eternal Word that both tortured and blessed them. That word must be heard anew and in strange ways: a burning bush for Moses, a cry in the night for Samuel, a potter’s wheel for Jeremiah, a sanctuary vision for Ezekiel, a blinding light for Saul, and a cross for our Lord. To hear the soft word of God in the little child, the awful word of God in death, the beautiful word of God in love, or the terrible word of God in pain is both our joy and our anguish. Today that word is coming to us in a new key, and its chief articulators are the wretched of the earth—the marginalized, the victims, the voiceless. That word is often framed in the ambiguities and not the clarities; it comes as we struggle with the imponderables of dust and destiny.

Let me urge that we not compromise the dimension of depth and mystery in life. Some would seek to strip the Bible of its human dimension, rooted in a tradition of life and experience, and freeze it into propositional dogmatics and a quick answer book—something hurled at us, as it were, from out of the sky. This cheapens and degrades the agonizing struggles of the ancient writers to discern the will of God in the midst of their puzzling and often turbulent history. Our very gospel itself is a mixture of light and mystery. Paul understood it as the unveiling of a mystery—“He has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will.” But the Apostle said with equal fervor, “Now we see through a glass darkly; now we know in part.” He could add, “How unsearchable are his judgments and his ways past finding out.”

That mixture of light and mystery, faith and doubt, certainty and tentativeness, has always permeated our Christian tradition. Martin Luther’s triumphant certainties were punctuated with shadowed hours when he was shaken with desperation and blasphemy. Wesley’s heart, strangely warmed at Aldersgate, knew the chill of later doubt. Jeremiah, in a dark moment, dared to call God “a deceitful brook and waters that fail.” We rejoice in the soaring words of Job, “I heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now mine eyes see thee,” but those words were not uttered until he had experienced the abyss. “Behold I go forward, but he is not there and backward, but I cannot perceive him.”

The issue of this particular sermon can be illuminated by reference to John the

Baptist, that bold forerunner of Jesus who radiated vitality, dispensed with the accessories of life, and spoke with flaming syllable and burning word. He comes on the pages of the New Testament with the imperial note, “Behold the Lamb of God who taketh away the sins of the world.” He represents the dividing line between an age brought to its close and a new age begun. He was not destined to see the true nature of the Kingdom, for it lay beyond the span of his life and experience.

In Matthew 11 we have the picture of the great forerunner in Herod’s dark prison. All along John had nurtured the great Advent hope. He envisioned the kingdom coming in terms of judgment—ax, winnowing fork, and fire. He expected Jesus to act dramatically in the overthrow of the wicked and the vindication of the righteousness. Yet where were the signs of Jesus’ coming? There was adulterous Herod lording it in his palace, Pharisaism undisturbed, and the Kingdom far from coming. Let the Messiah take charge with refining fire and cleansing judgment!

John was a child of the desert, at home in the clean winds and open spaces. But in Herod’s dark prison the eagle is caged, and waiting fretted his soul. He knew how to work for God, but he did not know how to wait for God. He had lost the cadence and music of the Jesus way. Why does God so long delay his help? Like all of us, the forerunner wanted the light of sun and star, not flickering shore lights. Frustration boils to the surface, and John sends word to Jesus, “Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?” What an embarrassment—that filed away in his “professional folder” for all subsequent centuries to read! Did the question belong to John or to his disciples? Grammar does not settle the question, but I believe it is John’s. Did the question voice growing doubt or newly awakened hope, the faint dawn of a new faith or the dark night of the soul?

I wonder what answer John expected. Did he want Jesus to say, “Judgment is begun. The government is about to fall. Mystic hands will lay hold of these towering monuments of iniquity. Armies are massing. Sinners will be obliterated. The wrath of God is on the march.” Whatever the answer might have been, that little vignette of John touches our humanity. Half of us is on the mount of transfiguration and half in the shadowed valley. John received his answer: “The blind receive their sight; the lame walk; lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear; the dead are raised; the poor have the gospel preached to them.” Moreover, the Master demonstrated remarkable patience and understanding, for he responded to John’s anguished question with neither chastening word nor searing reprimand. There is no accusation: “You have forfeited your discipleship. You are no longer accredited. Doubters cannot serve in this army.” Rather, we have at last Jesus’ glowing tribute: “A greater than John the Baptist has not arisen.”

It is not always easy to believe that “the slow watches of the night no less to God belong.” That immortal preacher at Brighton in England, Frederick W. Robertson, dead at 37, his mighty voice stilled by a brain tumor, described the longest night of his spiritual pilgrimage with terrifying reality.

It is an awful hour when this life has lost its meaning, human goodness nothing but a name, and sky above this universe a dead expanse, black with the void from which God himself has disappeared..., when everything seems wrapped in hideous uncertainty.

There is virtue in that fundamental honesty that is willing to face up to life’s

dissonances as well as to its harmonies. The Kingdom of God is made up of a wonderful company of joyous possessors and tormented seekers. Out of the welter of life's experiences we forge what George Santayana once called our "fighting faith." Life's ambiguities need not reduce us to a paralyzing impotence. One of the great hallmarks of an authentic Christian life style is the courage and willingness to risk and venture, seeking no security save the garrisoning of grace. The Apostle Paul had to deal realistically with his "thorn in the flesh," some hampering restriction or buffeting circumstance, but he learned how to get on with the business of life, thorn in the flesh or not. The great saints of the ages have shown us that, while we have no control over the *fact* of our existence, we do hold supreme command over the *meaning* of that existence for us. As the late Carlyle Marney once phrased it, "Faith is simply your inability to walk away from. Faith is to be unable utterly to abandon. Faith is to be unable to live as if a meeting or a memory were not back there."

One of the great moral exemplars of this century was Albert Schweitzer, who spent many years in equatorial Africa in an illustrious medical ministry that was, by his own admission, an attempt to live out the gospel in terms of obedience and service. He concluded his widely known theological work, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, with these words:

He comes to us as One unknown—without a name—as of old, by the lakeside, he came to men who knew him not. And to those who obey him he will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in his fellowship, and as in ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience who he is.