

Beauty in Time

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I've been retired since 2019; I'm still teaching, but the pace at Niagara University is much different than the pace and intensity of high school. I wouldn't have been able to endure much more of that pace, at 56 years of age, with meetings and things. But as a result of retirement, I've had more opportunity to reflect upon the past, in particular my 32 years in teaching, my first 10 years in Jane and Finch, my two and a half years at Chaminade College school, and my last 20 years in Markham, at Father Michael McGivney. Often something happens that reminds me of something that I have completely forgotten, and as this happens more often, I begin to realize just how much I have forgotten. There is, however, much that I do remember, and what I do remember brings me a great deal of peace. And it's that peace that I've begun to reflect upon.

Memory is very interesting. When I remember a past event, a weekend visit with a friend, or a certain time period in the classroom at a particular school, a retreat or a starve-a-thon that we had over the years, I am aware that there is something beautiful in those moments, something I miss, something I long to recover and experience again. And I believe that is the root of tradition. I think tradition is an attempt to make the past present once again. We believe that doing something the same way, repeating an action, making it ritual, like singing happy birthday and blowing out candles, or opening presents on Christmas morning and having turkey in the evening, allows us to experience once again what we experienced in the past, which now, in the present, we long for. We long to connect to that past, to the people who perhaps are no longer with us. But it begins with seeing now, at this time, something in the past that we didn't quite see back then or were not explicitly aware of. It seems that time strips away some of the dross of our experiences and leaves us with a memory that is purified, and something now radiates.

I became more and more aware of this the older I got. Now this "beauty" that I see when in the act of remembering was clearly there at the time, when it was not past, but present, but something prevented me from seeing or appreciating it at the time; it was buried underneath a host of baggage—perhaps stress, anxiety, preoccupation with what needs to be done at the moment, marking tests or creating exams, etc. What this means is that today, in the present moment, that element, that nugget of beauty that I will appreciate and see clearly 10 or so years from now—looking back and recalling this present moment—, is here now, at this moment. Is there a way for me to become aware of it now, so that I can delight in it now, rather than 20 years from now? And so, I began to look for it, and I think I have trained myself to see it now.

At one point during the pandemic, when the roads were empty and the city felt like a ghost town, I went for a ride in the car and drove past this retirement home. I didn't know anyone in that home, but I had a sense that some of our parishioners lived there. Strangely enough, a kind of anxiety came over me and I began to panic, for I thought: Who is giving them communion? Have they been forgotten? I sent the parish an email and they provided me with a list of parishioners who live there. So, I began to bring holy communion to these people, and it was a marvelous experience. I had quite a list at the beginning, but the list has been reduced to one person—the rest have died and two have moved out. But last summer I parked the car at this retirement home and walked towards the entrance and thought to myself: One day I won't be coming here anymore. They'll all be gone. And I was able to see that element of beauty that I've been talking about, in the present moment, which 10 or so years from now will be easily discernible. I took my time walking in and just enjoyed the moment—enjoy is a good word, because it was a matter of joy.

I'm getting better at discerning this element hidden in the present moment, every day, in every event, in everything I'm doing, for example, in things like teaching Confirmation classes at certain parishes. One day I'm going to look back and remember teaching Confirmation to these grade sevens in the church basements of St Lawrence the Martyr, Blessed Trinity, Sacred Heart, taking their questions, questioning them, etc., and I'm going to miss those moments, so, now, when I am teaching these classes, I have become more aware of that hidden element in the here and now. One day I won't be preaching anymore, but I'll recall those times when I was preaching at this Church or that Church, and I'll see something, something very memorable. I visit the hospitals often, at least once a week. Someday I will be a patient at that particular hospital, and I will recall the years when I'd walk the halls and visit the patients, and I know I will long for those moments again, and I am aware of that now when I am in the hospital visiting patients, walking the halls and stairwells making my way to their rooms. Someday my good friend Father Don Sanvido will be gone—I can't imagine him outliving me, given how much he smokes and the quality of his diet, for that would be a genuine miracle indeed if he outlived me. But he won't be around forever, and I will have lots of memories. So, when I am together with him, I now look for this hidden element, find it, and experience the joy of it now, since I know I am going to taste that joy in memory years later, with a longing to recover it in some way.

It's hard to do that when you are young, however, for the mind is just not focused on the present moment. And it is hard to do that when you are going through a difficult period, a period of suffering. But that hidden element is there even in periods of darkness and difficulty. Years later we will look back and see that "treasure hidden in the field of darkness", and it will be especially beautiful, because that period of suffering was a deeper sharing in the beauty that is Christ's passion.

And yet, the moments keep on drifting into the past. I am aware that *when I discern that element in the present moment*, I will often try to grasp on to it and keep it, but I can't do it. It still drifts into the past. And it is always sad to see it drift away like that. And yet, for God, nothing is past. God is the eternal present. So, does that mean when we die and enter into his rest, all those moments will be recovered in some way? That we will experience the accumulated joy of each one of those moments, in the eternal present? I think so. I am quite convinced that this is part of the joy of heaven. We are not to experience the fullness of that joy here, it will always escape our attempts to capture it, but it will be returned to us one hundredfold later on, in eternity.

I'd like to quote from Father Gerald Vann, a Dominican who was born in London in 1906 and died in 1963, and who wrote this 1947. The book is called *The Divine Pity*.

First you must learn to see how your life is meant to be lived: in God, in oneness with all creation: all the things that God has made are made ultimately of the same stuff, so that there is a bond between them like the blood-tie that binds the members of a family; all the things that God has made have ultimately the same end, to worship and praise Him in their different ways; most important of all, God Himself is present in all the things that He has made, and His presence is discernible in them to the eyes of faith and love and worship—and we best assist the song of creation, and recognize our oneness with all things most truly and most fully, when we learn to see them in God and God in them; and then it is to Him that they can lead us.

But to see things thus is to see them not only in a new light but in a new framework: the framework not of time but of eternity. We cannot escape from the former; but we can acquire the latter, the kingdom of heaven. For the pagan poet there must always be in his love of the beauty of things the sense of their transitoriness, the *lacrimae rerum* [the tears of things]; for the Christian this is secondary. You cannot wholly

escape the sadness of beauty's fading, the pain of loss or the pain of parting; but there is a sense in which nothing fades, nothing is lost, everything that is is eternal, in the mind and heart of God. We mourn what is lost to us in the past, we long for what is not yet ours; but the life of God is not in time, in the life of God there is no past or future, there is only the eternal present. A fleeting moment of beauty is always equally present to God, whether it be for us in the long-distant past or yet to come in the remote future. And so, to share in the life of God is, in a sense, to share in that permanence: it is to have, under all the pain that time inflicts, a deep sense of the abidingness of things, because it is to live, with God, in the eternal present. So it is to be at peace, to have that peace which the world cannot give: to fall in love is not primarily to have something new, but to be something new: this joy that I have, the actual presence, the sight and hearing, these can be taken from me; but if all my love is part of my love of God, then the joy that I am, the joy that can become as it were a part of me, that must abide, and distance cannot affect it.

All this should give us a deep realization of the importance of each successive moment, since it is thus in this sense an eternal moment—an eternal act either of worship and gratitude and love or of selfishness and blindness. For ever and ever the priest and the Levite pass by the wounded man; for ever and ever there is the glory of the love of the good Samaritan; and every moment in our time-sequence must be either the one or the other (p. 18-19).

Existence in time is a constant dying, a drifting into the non-existent past. But Christ conquered death; he rose from the dead, so existence in time is a constant dying, each moment of which will rise again, in glory. Tradition seeks to recover the past, to make it present again, like the Mass, which actually does make present the sacrifice of Calvary. But in heaven, what tradition aims to achieve will be achieved. The joy of heaven will include the joys of each present moment of our existence, and so the deaths of each moment are not permanent; we can look at each moment and instead of saying "good-bye", we can say: "See you again soon".

Now, the gospel reading for this Sunday, the 2nd Sunday of Lent, is the Transfiguration. Allow me read this to you:

Jesus took Peter, James, and John and led them up a high mountain apart by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no fuller on earth could bleach them. Then Elijah appeared to them along with Moses, and they were conversing with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus in reply, "Rabbi, it is good that we are here! Let us make three tents: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He hardly knew what to say, they were so terrified. Then a cloud came, casting a shadow over them; from the cloud came a voice, "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him." Suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone but Jesus alone with them.

Now, what I find interesting about this gospel reading is the line: "It is good that we are here", or "it is good for us to be here". Like so much of the New Testament, the English translation does not do justice to the Greek. The Greek word here is not "good"; rather, the word is *kalon*: "It is *kalon* for us to be here". Aristotle used the word "kalon" in his Nicomachean Ethics, a word derived from *kaleo*, which means attractive; it is a word used in the context of aesthetics. The *kalon* in Aristotle is best translated as the morally beautiful. The gospel really should read: "It is beautiful for us to be here", or "morally beautiful to be here". The beauty is the moral atmosphere. This is an experience of beauty, the divine beauty. And it is an aesthetic experience that Peter, James, and John want to perpetuate, to keep it from drifting into the past: "Let us make three tents...".

Moses and Elijah are from the past, but they are in the present moment of the Transfiguration, contributing to its beauty; they represent salvation history before Christ. What is past is made present, in the here and now, through Christ.

Now, God the Son joined a human nature to himself. The eternal, who is Beauty Itself, has entered into time and joined himself to the matter of the universe. As Pope John Paul II said often, in joining a human nature, God the Son joined himself as it were to every human being. The Son is present to every human person. Those who have the theological virtue of faith, those who have allowed Christ the king to reign in their lives, are given the light of grace, the light of faith. They have become aware of that deep and hidden presence, the presence of God the Son within the interior castle of the soul. That's the *kalon* that exists at every moment, within every moment, in the lives of the faithful. That element of beauty that we see when looking back at things that have past is the *kalon* of the divine presence within time, stripped of the dross that acted as a distraction at the time. Our life is transfigured in Christ, right now, but there is so much that eclipses the radiance that the present moment contains. Later on, our memories of these events unveil the *kalon* so that we have a minor transfiguration experience.

To find that experience in the present, underneath the current dross that clouds it, we need to learn **to be** present. To be present is to be **in the present**. And **to be** present is a skill. It is interesting how the two words are akin: present and presence. To be present to another is to be in the presence of another, to be aware of their presence—not just their position in space. To be in the here and now, focused on the person before us. It is easy to be focused on a great person, but being present to the lowest of the low, that's a skill. It requires an ability to see something in that person that is well disguised. Mother Teresa always spoke of the poor as Jesus' disguise.

But some people find it very hard to be present. I've known clerics who had a hard time with that. They are positioned in a way that it appears they're listening, but they're not the slightest bit interested in what you are saying. They are not in the present, but in the future, in the next 45 minutes, but not in the now. One could sense the isolation when talking to such people, because they don't connect on an emotional level, because they don't really acknowledge your presence. You are not a presence; you are something that occupies a place in front of him. This is not a good emotional posture for a priest.

So, we're talking about past, present and future. Time is a very interesting concept. There's a great George Carlin routine on time that is utterly brilliant. In that routine, he says, with ingenious humor, "There is no time. It's a manmade invention...there are no numbers up in the sky...I've looked, they're not there. When is it? Sometimes we think we know where we are, but we don't really know when we are. You can't keep track of the time. Let me give you an example: there's a moment coming. It's not here yet...it's still on the way, it's in the future...It hasn't arrived...here it comes.... here it is... oh _____it's gone. There's no now. Everything is the near future or the recent past. But there's no present. Welcome to the present. Gone again. What time is it now? You mean what time was it then?"

It's worth looking up and watching it on YouTube. What makes this routine so interesting is that he's talking about *chronos* time. But there are two kinds of time: *chronos* and *kairos* time. Kairos is employed very often in the New Testament and it refers to a season, such as harvest time. Chronos time is measured time, quantified: an hour, a minute, etc. Chronos time moves outside of us. However, we can be "within time". We can move in it. If we move in it, then it is *always now*. As an analogy, think of a spacecraft. If we are outside the spacecraft, it zooms by us. If we are inside the spacecraft, we move along with it. Kairos time is time that we are in, and so it is always present. St.

Augustine speaks of this in his Confessions, book XI. But, *chronos* time is real nevertheless, and it makes demands on us. We have to move on. Peter, James, and John got a taste of the *kairos* time that is in heaven, but *chronos* time made demands on them. The experience of the transfiguration came to an end and they had to come down from the mountain.

Chronos and *kairos* time are simultaneous. *Chronos* time says I have an appointment at 10 o'clock, so I have to take leave of my friends and make my way there. But when I get to the doctor's office, I have to be present to the doctor, pay attention to him, be a presence to him and allow him to be a presence to me. But, even the trip to the doctor's office, the drive, or the bus ride, etc., is not meant to be pure *chronos*. I must be present to the beauty of the present moment: the view outside the window, the people on the subway, the walk to the doctor's office, or whatever.

God is outside of time, not subject to the passing of time, but time exists, and God is intimately present within all that exists as the First Cause of all that exists. God, who is Beauty Itself, is present in each moment of time.

And my students sense it. As I mentioned at last year's retreat, the first assignment that I give to my Niagara University students in January is to have them write out a short essay on how it is they got to where they are now, that is, how they got to teacher's college. Reading their personal stories of how they got to this point is really an exhilarating experience. Their stories are unique and rich in content, and there is often some hero in their lives, either their parents who came to Canada under adverse circumstances but struggled and overcame these obstacles through faith, trust in God, and hard work, or a great and unknown teacher in their lives who had a profound influence on them as a result of the way that teacher related to them, with great patience and perseverance, etc. Many of them have very positive memories of their school years. Each story from each student is very different, but each one is usually very uplifting and exhilarating, and it is easy to see the hand of divine providence in their lives, leading them to where they are now.

Now, it is amazing how many of these prospective teachers drifted from the faith, but returned, and it was the result of *memories* that were gradually uncovered, a feeling like something was lost, a world, and they rediscovered it. And they all want to know how to incorporate Catholic values into the curriculum. And of course, the way to do that is to bring Christ into the classroom with you every day, and the way to do that is to become Christ, as St. Paul says: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me". That's how you do it. Bring Christ into the classroom by your own personal conversion, without necessarily uttering words or preaching, and you sow the seeds of great memories in the future.

Recently I did a quick search on Amazon for a book of Don Bosco's Dreams. I used to have a book on the Dreams and Visions of Don Bosco, which is now very expensive. I don't have it anymore because a student borrowed it about 20 years ago and never returned it. So I purchased a kindle version of Don Bosco's dreams for a decent price, and when I started reading it, the whole Salesian world was brought back to me, the world that I was exposed to through great Salesian priests. But a couple of years ago, I learned that the priest who used to visit my classroom and tell us stories about St. John Bosco battles depression. And yet, here he was, visiting our classrooms, telling us about Don Bosco's dreams and visions, hanging out with students in the halls, and without him realizing it, he was exposing a world, that is, opening up a world to me and other teachers and to our students, creating beautiful memories for us, joyful memories, and he doesn't get to taste that joy. We were brought into that Salesian world through him. And I can look back easily and say it was beautiful for us to be there, in that room, and it was this

priest, who battles depression, who brought the beauty of Christ's presence, the beauty of that Salesian spirituality rooted in Christ, into our classroom. That's what Paul means when he says we carry the death of Christ in our body so that the life of Christ can be manifest in our body (2 Co 4, 10).

The transfiguration was a gift given to Peter, James, and John, to strengthen them for the impending trauma of Christ's passion, and the memories we create for these students are ordered to the same end, to strengthen them for the impending sufferings, difficulties, and traumas that await them. That's our vocation as Catholic teachers. It is a prophetic ministry. It is a ministry ordered to the creation of memories. To witness to the Kingdom, to this *kalon*, this beautiful state of living under the reign of Christ the king. Our task is to carry this into the classroom with us, to be filled with Christ, to be Christ, so that our students can know Christ and in later years remember, recall, that they have always known Christ, they've felt his kingdom before, and that they can make their way back into it if they have left it in some way.

I was going over these ideas with a patient of mine at the hospital, a young lady who suffers from clinical depression. I've been visiting her for many years now; certain months of the year are very difficult for her. But I was telling her about the themes of this retreat. I did ask her if she has any memories that bring her a sense of peace, and she said she had very few if any. And of course, she suffers from depression, which is a brain disease, and not something that results from bad moral choices. But I did give her something to think about; I said that we believe that God the Son joined a human nature and entered into human suffering. In joining himself to every man, he is especially present in the depths of our suffering and darkness. We don't suffer alone, although it may often feel that we do. But we don't. And this lady has a special cross to bear, as do all those who suffer from clinical depression. They must feel like they've been ripped off terribly. Others have their health, both mental and physical, they are tremendously privileged, brought up in a family that is well off, they travel and they've gone to university, they're working, etc. Life is tremendous. And here she is, this girl, in and out of mental health wards all her life. Life seems very unfair. But of course, our God is a God of justice. He balances the scales, and the divine justice has been revealed in the Person of Christ as the divine mercy. I told her that when you stand before God at the end of your life, and you see and grasp the meaning of your entire life from God's point of view, that is, when you see your life in the light of Christ and the paschal mystery, and you reflect on the prospect of doing it all again, you will not want to change anything. She reacted to that and insisted she just cannot imagine that and doubts very much that she would not want anything changed. Nevertheless, that is the case, because she will see that Christ was present all along in the depths of that suffering, that her depression was a special sharing in the mental anguish of Christ that he endured throughout his life, especially on Holy Thursday night. She will see how her suffering has imprinted on her the image of the suffering Christ, and friendships are based on common qualities, and she'll see how much her life has in common with Christ's life, unlike the life of prosperity and privilege. She can't see that now, but she will in eternity. But she can begin to look now, to reflect upon her life in that light and perhaps begin to see it, begin to discover the suffering Christ in the midst of that darkness.

Joy is really not the same thing as pleasure. I'm not sure how many of you have experienced this, but think of a time when you were terribly sick. I remember last year having the stomach flu, which is why I made sure to get the flu shot this year. I was vomiting every half hour, but there was nothing to throw up. There was something in my stomach, which was getting signals every half hour to heave, and it was horrible. All day. My rib cage was sore for days afterwards. But I do remember that although it felt horrible, deep in the center of my soul was the joy of Christ's presence, and so I could laugh in the midst of this. It was horrible, but I could laugh, aware of how ridiculous it is to be heaving up nothing and to have to endure this for the entire day. That physical suffering does

not touch that deepest center where the Lord is. Suffering can do that, it can strip away the dross and allow us to find him in the midst of that suffering.

The suffering involved in clinical depression is much deeper than the stomach flu, without a doubt, much deeper and darker, full of despair, but the Lord is there nonetheless. The specific cross given to such a person may involve being unable to detect the peace of his presence at any level, but he is there nevertheless, and one day this person will see it and delight in it, and see what it has done for her, how that suffering has configured her to the beautiful image of Christ crucified. And so, the scales will be balanced in her favor.

How do we train ourselves to be able to see the beauty in the present moment, so that we can begin to live in the moment and enjoy the pearl of great price in this moment, rather than 10 years from now?

I am convinced that contemplative prayer, the prayer of quiet, the prayer of adoration, what some people call centering prayer, allows us to become more and more attuned to the present moment. And that's what I'd like to talk about next, in Part II.