

Transfiguration, of Jesus: March 3rd, 2019

Readings: Exodus 34:29-35, Psalm 99, 2Corinthians 3:12-4:2, 2 Peter 1:16-21, Luke 9:28-36

The Challenge of an Integrated Life

Introduction

“Earth needs heaven and heaven needs earth....earth needs heaven and heaven needs earth”. These were the words of a man whose is distinguished by his escape from assassination. Jon Sobrino, a Jesuit theologian and Spaniard of Basque origin, was in Manila, the Philippines in 1989 – giving classes – when his several colleagues of the University of Central America, were murdered by Salvadoran government directed death-squads. Sobrino is still with us – **older as are we all** – but no less wise. Indeed, this saying that he first offered at a workshop on Christian spirituality, that I attended, has stayed with me and figured in sharpening my understanding of what Christian spirituality involves: “earth needs heaven and heaven needs earth”.

My goal today is to help us think about the meaning of the “spiritual” in Christian faith. I would like to do this in just a few steps. First, examine Sobrino’s comment a little more with the help of Celtic insights. Second, turn to the Gospel, and third look to Camilla Fortescue Chumley Browne, or “Chummy”, of Nonatus House, the East End of London, who we saw in the video.

What Does Sobrino Mean? When Jon Sobrino made this comment several years ago, he was pointing out that concrete, real existence, is not enough; that we need, not just to engage in the mechanics of life and living, but to “dig down”, to deepen our understanding of ourselves, and the world, and God. For Sobrino, “heaven” refers to *that* process of deepening: “**earth needs heaven**”. But he also proposed that “heaven needs earth”. What he **means** is this: that Christian spirituality only has meaning when immersed in reality, concrete lived reality. To be spiritual does not mean, that we live in the heavens, detached, separated from “the real”. It is only reality that provides the raw material for thought and prayer in the first place. Without reality, spirituality is meaningless. “Earth needs heaven”, meaning, life is more than its basic mechanics. But equally “heaven needs earth”, meaning spirituality can only be built upon real lived experience.

This idea of the connection between heaven and earth is also referred to in Celtic spirituality. In the Christian thought of the Celts, there are what are called “thin spaces”, or “thin places” Thin spaces are not spiritual locations alone, detached from the real world, but are always those spaces where heaven meets earth, where earth meets heaven. Sometimes they are sacred places but not always. My first memory of a thin space was when my family would go to Port Macquarie for holidays. Almost always, we would visit St Thomas’ Anglican Church there – on the hill – where we would walk in hushed tones. I recall, being moved by the sheer colonial beauty of the building. I could hear the ghosts of the convicts (Port Macquarie was a penal colony) as they shuffled under guard in to the back, waiting for service to begin. But most of all, I could sense the Spirit of God in all that: *it was a thin space, where heaven met earth*. Another experience of thin spaces, was in the Catholic Cathedral in Santiago Chile, during the dictatorship. The sheer beauty of the frescos on the ceiling moved me, as I sought, not escape, but brief respite from the thick social, and political violence in the streets outside: *it was a thin space where heaven met earth*

Gospel Reading: Transfiguration of Jesus

Let’s turn to the Gospel! The story of the Transfiguration of Jesus, often puzzles people, and that is not to be wondered at. In an age when Christian faith holds defensively to its own “thick” assurances and doctrines, its own “thick” interpretations of the Good News (heaven in isolation); and the secularists, grip their own “thick” opaque tenets and principles (earth in isolation); the very idea of some sort of thin space, where heaven and earth actually meet, seems too much to ask

for. And yet, it is only in seeking the thin space where both meet, that there is a way ahead in the modern world.

This is the point, I think, amongst others, of Luke's rendition of the Transfiguration. In similar vein to Mark and Matthew, when Moses and Elijah withdraw from this heavenly, spiritually ecstatic moment, Peter wishes to preserve the religious moment in isolation, to remain in the heavenly, to commemorate it, by building booths: "*Master, it is wonderful for us to be here! Let us put up three shelters – one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.*" And Luke continues, "*But he did not know what he was saying*". Peter fails to understand the importance of those thin moments where heaven meets earth and earth meets heaven, where spirituality meets reality and reality meets spirituality. Peter prefers the ease of the mountain-top. **Luke is telling us, in criticism of Peter, that while the thick religious experience may be comforting, it is only in the thin spaces where heaven meets earth, where spirituality connects with messy reality; only there, can real Christian faith be lived, openly and generously.**

Chummy – Camilla Fortescue Chumley Browne

And so to Nonatus House and Chummy! The beauty of Nonatus House is that it is a "thin space", where heaven meets earth and earth meets heaven, a space where spirituality meets reality and reality meets spirituality. In particular, Chummy – Camilla Fortescue Chumley Browne – represents Nonatus House at its best. While she is gauche, with her sheer size, her ill-fitting uniform, and her upper-crust accent and choice of words - not to mention her self-consciousness – this woman possesses a sense of self which is inspiring. Her identity as a Christian- suggested in the scene, where she addresses the cross on her bed-room wall and embraces the cross around her neck – points to a faith that is both of heaven and earth, an integrated faith where earth needs heaven and heaven needs earth, where reality needs Christian spirituality and where Christian spirituality needs reality. Where faith and reality are genuinely and admirably integrated. Chummy is the model of an integrated Christian life, a woman of thin spaces.

In the contemporary world, earth needs heaven, even though the secularists do not see it. In the contemporary world, heaven needs earth, even though religious people, insist that they have all the answers. It is in the thin spaces, where earth and heaven meet, that we may learn from each other.