

in saying, 'The angels praise thy majesty, the dominations adore it, and the powers are in awe; the heavens and the virtues of heaven and the blessed seraphim celebrate it with united joy. With these we pray thee join our voices while we say with lowly praise: Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Hosts, heaven and earth are full of thy glory.'



TOO GOOD TO BE USED

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WHEN at length Job's comforters had done their reasonable best to justify God's ways with man according to their own theological preconceptions, *the Lord answered him out of the whirlwind, and said, Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge? Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? When the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy.*¹ Let a scholastic psychologist bear in mind that closure to the debate when he sets out to outline how we should use our faculties in our life with God.²

Using is what we do with utilities, and these as such are expendable objects which though not valuable in themselves do serve a higher purpose. Hence it is not the same as cherishing, which is what we do with things dear in themselves, or as enjoying, which is what we do with things that give us pleasure. Three kinds of good, *bonum utile*, *bonum honestum*, and *bonum delectabile*—that is the classical division, and our environment is shot through with it in many and varying forms.³

I

Note, St Thomas warns us, the division is rather of contrasted notions than of different things.⁴ For what is useful from one aspect can be worthy and delightful from another, thus a police-

1 Job xxxviii, 1, 2, 7.

2 A continuation of 'Having our Faculties', *THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT*, xi, pp. 499-510, May, 1957.

3 Ia. v, 6, c. ad 3.

4 *Ibid.* ad 2.

man with respect to a householder and to his own wife. Similarly, what is valuable in itself may also be useful, thus a friend in need proves that *amicitia honesta et delectabilis* is also *amicitia utilis*.⁵ So also, what is fun may also be functional, otherwise the human race might die out for lack of incentive to propagate itself.⁶ It would go without saying, but for the streak of puritanism which infects most of us, that the worthy and the cheering may go together. That we enjoy our food, says St Thomas, is a sign that we need it.⁷ And, in the words of Marie Lloyd, a little bit of what you fancy does you good.

Nor should it be a little bit, for delight is a pretty good indication of whether you are on to a good thing or not.⁸ Most of us would profit from a great deal more of it. When speaking of boredom, St Thomas echoed St Gregory about the troubles that follow from absence of joy—despair, meanness, sluggishness, rancour, spite and wasteful brooding.⁹ Hedonism is worse in theory than in practice, since, as both Aristotle and Plato noticed, it puts the cart before the horse. A thing is not good because it gives us pleasure; it gives us pleasure because it is good.¹⁰ Or rather, a thing which gives us pleasure may only look good, *bonum apparens*; it is really good for us, *bonum verum*, only when it fits into our entire scheme of happiness.¹¹ What matters is that we should find what is truly sound, *bonum honestum*, through the appropriate means, *bonum utile*, and that is decided by our knowledge. Whereas what is pleasurable, *bonum delectabile*, is settled by our desire, which may or may not match what our reason tells us is right. If not then we shall be led astray.¹²

Hence our moral duty in life is to sort out means and ends, that is, to appreciate what is honourable and serviceable and to enjoy only those things we should enjoy. I say *only*, which sounds grudging: I should add that we should not fail to enjoy those at least. For we are placed in a world where things fair in themselves

⁵ See 2a-2ae. xxiii, 5; cvi, 5; cxiv, 1, *ad I. VIII Ethics, lect. 3, 13; de duobus praeceptis Caritatis, 5.*

⁶ 1a. xcvi, 2, *ad 3; 1a-2ae. xxxi, 6; III Contra Gentes, 26.*

⁷ VII Ethics, lect. 14.

⁸ 1a-2ae. xxxi, 2; xxxiv, 1, 2, 4.

⁹ 2a-2ae. xxxv, 4.

¹⁰ 1a-2ae. ii, 6.

¹¹ 2a-2ae. xxiii, 7; xlv, 1, *ad I.*

¹² 1a-2ae. xxxiv, 2, *ad I.*

are not worthless. *And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good.*¹³ Such is the refrain of the first chapter of the Bible.

Indeed the first obstacle to those who seek God is not the problem of evil but the problem of good. 'Too late', cried St Augustine, 'too late am I come to love thee, O thou Beauty, so ancient and still so new; too late am I come to love thee. And behold, thou wert with me, and I without; and there made I search for thee, and mistakenly cast myself upon the things of thy creation, which yet thou hadst made fair. Thou wert with me indeed, but I remained not with thee. These things withheld me from thee, which yet, if they had not their being in thee, would not be at all.'¹⁴

That is the pathos and tragedy of human sin: not that we would directly turn away from God, but that we are prepared to treat creatures as though they were our ultimate end, and to let that be our settled disposition.¹⁵ Nevertheless, because they are not ultimate ends it does not follow that they are not ends at all but merely means; because they fall short of complete worth it does not follow that they have no goodness within themselves; because we still look for more it does not follow that they are only utilities.¹⁶ To count them cheap, says St Thomas, is to slight divine power.¹⁷

They are true goods unless they lead us away from God. The spiritual writers may teach us to be frugal about them, but stinginess is another matter. There is something wrong with our spiritual digestion if they turn to dust and ashes in our mouth. All very well to feel disillusioned after a disappointment, but a settled misanthropy is no part of Christian teaching. So also there is something phoney about religious advice which bids us treat creatures merely as penitential occasions, or at most as objects for dutiful attention. Certainly there is a Christian sadness with the world, and St Thomas takes the *lacrimae rerum* into that Gift of the Spirit called Knowledge.¹⁸ This is not to say that we should

¹³ Gen. i, 31.

¹⁴ *Confessions*, x, 27.

¹⁵ 1a. xix, 9; 1a-2ae. lxxii, 1, 5; lxxv, 1; lxxxvii, 4; 3a. lxxxvi, 4, 5.

¹⁶ 1a. vi, 4; 2a-2ae. xxiii, 7; xlv, 1, ad 1. *I Sentences*, VIII, i, 2, ad 2.

¹⁷ III *Contra Gentes*, 69.

¹⁸ 2a-2ae. ix, 4.

school ourselves to think of the world as a spa, and of a spa merely as a place where you drink nauseating waters. *Medicina amara*—it is his example of a pure utility.¹⁹

Yet how irrepressible human nature is, thank God. As Epsom Salts make admirable sparkling snow on the brown-paper rocks of the Christmas crib, so human beings can manage to esteem and enjoy the things they have to make do with. They are wise. It is as St Thomas noted: the distinction between the valuable and the useful is rather of different relative aspects than of things in themselves. When it was said—I think by St Augustine but I cannot find where—that we go wrong when we enjoy the useful and use the enjoyable, the words are to be taken precisely and as implying, not that we should not take pleasure in putting a high polish on the floor, but that we should not be obsessed by it. That applies to all things in this life: we can have too much creature, but never enough God.²⁰

II

We have reached our point, and a lesson we have to learn. It is this. God is too excellently good and delightful to be used. He is to be loved for his own sake, and enjoyed. *Deo nullus recte utitur, sed fruitur*, said St Augustine.²¹ He is better than a substitute object that serves when we are beaten by life. He is more than the First Cause and Integrator of our universe. He is beyond the solution of our problems. He is himself. He is not for us. We are for him.

But when we have said that we pause. For even in affirming his transcendence we are almost as tangled in our rational concepts as when we introduce him into our thoughts and desires in order to straighten them out. 'If thou hadst been able to comprehend him as thou thinkest, by so thinking thou hast deceived thyself. This then is not God, if thou hast comprehended it: but if this be God, thou hast not comprehended it'.²² How full of surprises he is, how gently snubbed we are even when we would proclaim his majesty, how unjealous a lover he is who does not scorn

¹⁹ 1a. v, 6, ad 2.

²⁰ 1a-2ae. lxiv, 4; 2a-2ae. xxiv, 7.

²¹ LXXXIII Quaest. 30; quoted 1a-2ae. xvi, 3 *sed contra*.

²² St Augustine, *Sermones CCCXCVI*, lii, 6.

being a comfort when all else has failed, how giving of himself for our sake with not too many questions asked. He made us for his honour, but he has nothing to gain; he does not need to see his own reflection, and his honour is our happiness. What is the theological virtue of hope but a kind of supernatural concupiscence whereby we want what his almighty power will do for us?²³

Nevertheless, his mercy is not our right. He is not under contract, and his grace is not our due. *Shall he that contendeth with the Almighty instruct him?*²⁴ I wonder if that be a rare effrontery? Presumption lies close to hope, and tempting God lies close to religion; both are sins which share the common element of intruding our little wants into the plans of Providence.²⁵ For our consolation St Thomas judges that there are worse sins: presumption is not so bad as despair, for expecting too much from God is not so bad as expecting too little since it is more like him to spare than to punish; and the irreverence of trying to find out what his intentions are going to be is less than the superstition of getting them all wrong.²⁶

We profess that we are at God's service. Do we feel that he is at ours, expect him to serve our purposes, want to tell him what he should do? Put like that you will reply, Who would be so ridiculous? Yes, who? Most of us are good soil for the vices—not for all, because we can extract a melancholy satisfaction from the truth that the vices are not interconnected like the virtues and that some of them cancel one another out.²⁷ We are probably deceiving ourself when we think of any particular sin as off our map. How often people seem to possess those very faults they most reprobate in others. How often articulate humility is wide of the mark. What, me?—we have all heard the tone of astonishment.

Anyhow, let us not be too choosy about our weaknesses but be prepared to ask ourselves whether we do not fall into the habit of using God. We do it when we are morbidly fearful and scrupu-

23 2a-2ae. xvii, 2; 6, ad 3.

24 Job, xl, 2.

25 2a-2ae. xxi, 1; xcvi, 2.

26 2a-2ae. xxi, 2; xcvi, 4.

27 1a-2ae. lxxii, 1.

lous, and demand the sort of reassurance about our spiritual security not yet accorded by Divine Providence. *Wherefore, my beloved, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God who worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.*²⁸ We do it also when we are quite the reverse and bouncing. The assumption that God is on our side pervasively and subtly runs through all the sins of spiritual pride, not an uncommon sin when it is not read in an exalted sense.²⁹

But who is like to God? Lovable and terrible, declares St Augustine, serene and severe, beautiful and harsh. He is the Holy, Holy, Holy of the trisagion; he is set in his awful purity apart from the mixture of our wants; he is the *mysterium tremendum*. *There is none like thee, O Lord: thou art great, and great is thy name in might. Who shall not fear thee?*³⁰ If his intense goodness does not shrivel our petty impurity, at least can we be more than his slaves with no will but his.³¹ How can we think to use him? Listen to this formidable irony: *Gird up thy loins now like a man. I will demand of thee, and declare thou unto me. Wilt thou also disannul my judgment? wilt thou condemn me, that thou mayest be righteous? Hast thou an arm like God? or canst thou thunder with a voice like him? Deck thyself now with majesty and excellence, and array thyself with glory and beauty. Cast abroad the rage of thy wrath, and behold every one that is proud and abase him. Look on every one that is proud and bring him low; and tread down the wicked in their place. Hide them in the dust together; and bind their faces in secret. Then will I also confess unto thee that thine own right hand can save thee.*³²

And yet, and yet . . . *not servants but friends*, he said.³³ When we are commanded to love God for his own sake, it is to do more than want him, more than to admire him; it is to share with him and enjoy him.³⁴ Charity is no aspiration, it is not worship; it is friendship. It goes past what suits our convenience, it goes past awe; it is rejoicing with God just because he is God. Let us not be worried that we are given an impossible command

28 Phil. ii, 12-13.

29 2a-2ac. clxii, 2, 4, 6.

30 Jer. x, 6-7.

31 2a-2ac. xliv, 4, ad 2.

32 Job, xl, 6-14.

33 John, xv, 15.

34 2a-2ac. xxiii, 1.

to keep unless we have reached such heroic sanctity that we are constantly aware of divine goodness suffusing our every interest. We make a good beginning in this present life if our mind tells us that he alone is good of himself and if our will is prepared never to act against him.³⁵ Let our sensations and emotions tag along as best they may: we will be grateful if they are granted devotion, loyal if it be withheld.

See how we have come to the same conclusion that God is not to be used. But this time, not by insisting on the awe he should inspire, but by meditating on what lies at the heart of friendship. Even in human relationships we know that happy stage when no advantage is sought and there is no thought of approbation and all is unquestioning and actively still in joy. And who can compare with God and who is more accessible?



ST AUGUSTINE'S SERMON ON PSALM XXXIII: I

Translated by EDMUND HILL, O.P.

After recapitulating his previous day's sermon on the title of the psalm, he proceeds:

SO much for the psalm's title. Now let us listen to the actual words of him who is affecting and drumming at the city gate. 'I shall bless the Lord at all times, his praise shall be always in my mouth.' Christ says it, let the Christian say it too, because the Christian is part of Christ's body. When will you bless the Lord? When he makes things easy for you? When you enjoy worldly wealth, and plenty of corn, oil, wine, gold, silver, slaves, cattle, and the best of health besides; when your crops and herds flourish, and nothing dies or dwindles out of time, when your house is filled to overflowing with prosperity, is that when you are going to bless the Lord? No, no, but at all times. Even then, therefore, when bad times come, and you get a taste of the whip of the Lord our God, when all these things are turned upside

³⁵ 2a-2ae. xliv, 1, ad 3.