

OUR LORD AND THE RICH YOUNG MAN

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In that pregnant, packed bit of writing, whose numerous points we continually miss because we are so familiar with the sound of the words, the prologue to St. John's gospel, the sentence occurs, "He came to his home, and his own family did not welcome him". That is Goodspeed's translation, and I think it gives you the stab of the sentence better than most others. Only it is perhaps a little daring, when the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity becomes incarnate on earth, to describe him as coming home. But it gets the point, the point which stands out so clearly if you try to read through the Old Testament. Once you get beneath the surface of the Old Testament, so largely disedifying, so largely unattractive to the reader, you can see, all down the centuries, an intensive work of preparation going on, for one particular event. The thunders of Sinai are the artillery meant to soften just this one particular point in Satan's defenses. The corpses piled up in such profusion are so much manure meant to fertilize this one particular plot of the earth's surface. The sudden snatches of hundred per cent spirituality which keep on cropping up here and there in the Old Testament, taking your breath away, are the soft twigs and leaves out of which a nest is being built for the Heavenly Dove to find a refuge at last, after all the desolation the deluge has left behind. I always regret the two books of Machabees being put in where they are, because it spoils the whole crescendo effect Malachy makes on you. Malachy is the last book of the Old Testament; "Here am I sending my messenger to prepare the way for thy coming"; everything's ready for zero hour, the land was never in such good heart, the nest is all finished, down to the last detail: *now!*

And then, humanly speaking, the terrible fiasco which followed! The people who wanted to see our Lord always the *wrong* people; the Wise Men coming to adore while Herod is plotting to murder him, the Greeks coming up to St. Philip with their "Sir, we would see Jesus", on the very eve of his Passion! We are going to talk about our Lord's earthly life, and of course the subject is infinite; even if you think about our Lord's earthly life as a model and an inspiration for us, his miserable servants, the subject is infinite. You must select, you must classify, you must clarify your material. So I thought we would confine our attention to this single, salient fact about our Lord's life, which St. John writes down so ruthlessly on the very threshold of it; he came home, and his own family did not welcome him. How terribly often one heard, during the war, of a soldier who came back from the wars to find that he was not wanted! The wife – God forgive us all, what horrible creatures we are! – had got tied up with another man, and the fireside, dreamed of among desert sands or Burmese swamps, had become a cold hearth in the meantime; just where the man *ought* to have been welcome, he was one too many. When we have exhausted our indignation over that familiar picture, let's remind ourselves that this was, in effect, the experience of Incarnate God. His own people, his Bride, as the prophets loved to think of it, had no use for him, could make no room for him in its twisted habit of thought. "I was sought by those who found me not" – the prophets had always been foretelling it. The people our Lord came to redeem in the first instance, not all of them, but as a people, rejected him, and reject him still.

We can't, I suppose, in the common meaning of the word, say that our Lord Jesus Christ was ever disappointed. Because in our experience disappointment means the unexpected happening; and the unexpected could not happen to him. But I think it is quite obvious that he had the feeling of disappointment; of wishes frustrated, of endeavours thrown away. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often I would have gathered your children, as a hen gathers her chickens under her wings, and you refused" – that tone of melancholy is, you many say, the *leit-motif* of the gospels. It isn't so, after all, with the lives of the saints; when you read the life of a saint, you expect to be told about all the people who at first opposed him, but were afterwards won over by his gentleness and patience. But with our Lord's life it is just the other way; we are continually being confronted with his failures. "After this, many of his disciples went back to their old ways, and walked no more in his company" – what a dreadful admission! In his own town of Nazareth he is unhonoured; the "cannot" (whatever that means) do many miracles there, because of their unbelief; and these were the people who should have been so proud of him! Not even his kinsmen believed in him – just the people who should have known him best! And then there are the nine lepers who never come back to give thanks, and the three would-be disciples who turn out, after all, to be wouldn't-be disciples. And even in the training of his own apostles what a lot of set-backs there are; the want of faith, the want of patience, the want of humility, and then St. Peter's denial as a kind of signature-tune at the end

of it all! How our Lord's own teaching reflects the mood of a disappointed man; the crops that come to nothing, the people who bury their talents in napkins, or say they will work in the vineyard and then don't, or accept invitations to the wedding and then send word at the last moment that they can't be there; the fish that have to be thrown back into the sea as uneatable, the people who keep saying "Master, master" and then do nothing about it; was there ever a Teacher so haunted by the sense of failure?

And, of course, there was Judas Iscariot, always at his elbow ... But I think of all the pictures in the gospels which represent our Lord as thwarted in his human contacts, none is more poignant than the account given in St. Mark of the rich young man. Do you remember what he says – the other evangelists haven't the courage to say it? He says, "Jesus fastened his eyes on him, and conceived a love for him". Well, we don't know that the rich young man came to grief in the end. He may have been Joseph of Arimathea; he may have been St. Paul himself. But I think our instinct is that the refusal then made was made once for all. And yet this was the man our Lord loved; the only individual described in that way by the gospels, except St. John, and the family at Bethany. Our Lord looked him well in the eyes, and conceived a love for him; that is the plain meaning of the Greek. He saw qualities there which brought out all his human capacity for affection; this was the kind of person you would be glad to do something for, a nature capable of great generosity, and needing to be treated on a heroic level; "Go and sell all thou hast, and give to the poor". And we, coming fresh from reading the lives of the saints, think we know the inevitable sequel; "the young man was so deeply impressed by these unexpected words that he went straight home, sold all that he had, and afterwards became one of the most edifying of our fathers" – that must be it, surely? No; he went away sorrowing, for he had great possessions. Looked at and loved by the Saviour of the world, and he turns out a failure!

I think it's probably true to say that, while life in this fallen world is a disappointing experience in many ways, the most searing disappointments we encounter are due to the interaction of other people's lives with our own. You can put the reason quite briefly thus. Being human, we are fonder of some people than of others. Being human, we inevitably try to influence the people we are fond of. And, whether by some mysterious law, or just some piece of bad luck, the people we are fondest of are not, as a rule, the people who improve most under our influence.

I know all that sounds frightfully pompous; I must beg you to understand that I'm not thinking of those people with a real love of interference who go about the world continually trying to arrange other people's lives for them, and commonly deserving all the disappointments they get. Nor when I talk of influencing other people do I mean, necessarily or chiefly, trying to correct their faults. More probably we try to bring out, to encourage the best in them – as our Lord did with the rich young man. He must have had some faults, but our Lord didn't bother about those; he wanted to start him straight on the counsels of perfection. So it is when we are fond of people; we want them to live up to our ideal of them; we want them to develop the good qualities we have discovered in them; we want them to appreciate the same things, the same people, as ourselves. And, conversely, if it is part of your work in life to influence other people, you almost inevitably become fonder of some than of others. The teacher has his favorite pupils; the parish priest finds himself worrying more about the spiritual welfare of two or three people in his congregation than about the rest; the mother, even, finds out that she has favorites among her own children, though she is very careful not to let anybody else find it out. So it's the commonest thing in the world to be fond of somebody, and for that reason to be trying to influence them in the right direction; to have day-dreams about it, make plans about it. And as you get older and have less life of your own to live, you are more than ever apt to live in other people's lives; the parent in the child, the teacher in his clever pupil, the priest in that girl who is going to make such a splendid nun, and so on.

And of course, we are asking for trouble. *The Imitation of Christ* asks us, in that cynical way it has, How do you expect to be a success in running other people's lives, when you see what a failure you are in running your own? How familiar the feeling is, even when we are trying to deal with our own bad habits, our own laziness or ill-temper, that the self we are trying to deal with is a different person from ourselves, or anyhow a different animal; a dog that simply won't lie down, a horse that simply won't go straight! And then, fresh from that experience of not being able to impose our own will on ourselves, we try to impose it on other people! Naturally we let ourselves in for disappointment. What a lot of sorrow is caused in the lives of good people, of good Christian people anyhow, by this refusal, on the part of those they love, to run

according to schedule! What a lot of non-Catholic husbands you meet, full of honesty, full of good will, happily married to exemplary Catholics, who still don't get the grace of faith! What a lot of Catholic parents whose children, on growing up, have run wild, or have lost touch, somehow, with their religion! We all know the story of St. Ambrose, when St. Monica was almost in despair about the false direction taken by her son Augustine, assuring her, "It is not possible that the child of so many tears should perish". Does that really seem true to our experience? And if not, how dreadful that the very unselfishness which makes us want to live in and for others should itself be an instrument that tortures us!

What shall we say to them, the people whose very tenderness of heart makes life a purgatory for them? Three things, I think, in any case.

First, let them reflect that they are undergoing an experience which our Lord himself has hallowed by his example. And, remember, it was all the worse for him in proportion as his heart was larger, as his sympathies had a wider range than ours. He was disappointed in the rich young man, not merely for his own sake but because he stood as a type of the whole nation to which he belonged. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, still murdering the prophets!" ... here was this people of the Jews, so pathetically loyal, at least in external ways, to the Divine law delivered on Mount Sinai; "all these commandments I have kept from my youth up". This people of the Jews, with such splendid qualities of tenacity, of discipline, of God-fearingness! And now it is called upon to rise to the heights of its own vocation; "go and sell all thou hast, and give to the poor" – it is called upon to share, with the despised Gentiles, those treasures of Divine revelation, Divine sonship which had been lavished upon it; and it is going to fail at the test. We, whose hearts have a narrower range, find it difficult to see anything but our own immediate disappointments. But we want to ask, I think, for an enlargement of our view. We want our own tragedies to make us more sensitive to all the tragedies of the world around us, not shut us up in ourselves. We want to see, in the infidelities of those we love, not so much the danger of their loss, which touches us so nearly, but the slight, the indignity done to God's honour, not by this situation merely but by a thousand other situations just like it. If we want to lighten our disappointment by getting our Lord to share it with us, we must aspire to lighten all *his* disappointments by sharing them with him.

Second, let them never imagine, for a moment, that because the prayers they offer, the efforts they make, are not producing the result which is intended, therefore they are producing no result at all. After all, think what was the sequel to the story we have been thinking about, the story of the rich young man. He went away sorrowing; the incident, you would think, was closed; the refused invitation might just as well never have been made. Two hundred and fifty years passed, and those words, read out in church, reached the ears of another rich young man; he went straight out of church, sold all that he had, and went to live in the desert; St. Anthony, the great eternal model of Christian monasticism. Much oftenest, I think, you will find that our influence is most powerful where it is least direct, where we had no intention of exercising it. We are so curiously built, that the thing we are especially bent on doing is the thing we fail to do; we think too much about it, hesitate, lose our nerve, and make a mess of it. Nothing is more common, I think, in any kind of pastoral work than to find that you have failed over the people you specially wanted to make a good job of, and meanwhile you have made an impression on somebody you didn't suspect of taking any notice. I've been told by an old priest, and I think a good many would tell you the same, that when he wanted to beat up his parishioners to their duties he always had a mission to non-Catholics, and when he wanted to make converts he always asked a Redemptorist in to give the parish hell. I don't know whether it is some weakness in ourselves, or whether Almighty God, jealous for his own honour, prefers to achieve his results by indirect rather than by direct influence. But be sure all the prayers we say, all the efforts we make, are having some effect, somewhere.

And third, don't let them wish, or try, to be less sensitive to the needs of others, to worry less about others, than their nature bids them. Our natures differ very much about that, obviously; some people are worriers, some aren't, some find it much easier than others to shrug their shoulders and say, "Well, it can't be helped; I've done my best". A priest will often be tempted to wish that he were less of a man and more of a machine; that he could learn to deliver admonitions with the same splendid impartiality with which the postman delivers the letters every morning, to bestow absolution with the same automatic aloofness with the man in the booking-office shows, behind that grille which is so like the grille of a confessional. But he is wrong. Our natures are given to us so that we may make the best of them, not, apart from very

exceptional cases, so that we may alter them altogether. If you have the kind of pastoral instinct which makes you worry a lot about other people's souls, don't let it lead you into a morbid habit of wanting to interfere here, there and everywhere. No, but follow your own instincts; some people will have a special interest for you, will make a special claim on your sympathies; don't resist that attraction, it is all part of the nature God has given you, and therefore of the destiny God has arranged for you. But be prepared to make a mess of things; you probably will. Probably, as I say, the good you do will be something quite different, something you never intended; as likely as not something you will never hear about. But do what your hand finds to do; and then, when you are alone with God in your prayer, tell him that you want to be of use to those souls he means you to be of use to, those and no others. Tell him that you are ready to work for him blindfolded, and wait till the day of judgment before you ask what the result of your work was.

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