Nick Berry

know fear, know courage™

Essays

Good Friday

Christ the Exemplar. Your mention of his offering himself as the only way or door to salvation, the separating of families (he led me from my family), the outbursts of anger. Why would he not get angry with the moneylenders? What other response should he have made?

“I have to tell you that I find your presence offensive. I understand that you have a living to make, but this is possibly not the ideal spot. Could we go outside and discuss this in the forum, perhaps? I know someone who has a stall to let, and you’d find plenty of custom there.”

“Fuck off, hippie.”

He, his example, is the only path to salvation. He, Socrates, and the guy who dies under torture in *Nostromo* – I can’t find the reference, but I seem to recall the character as a scared and lowly man, perhaps not given a name by Conrad, who is strappadoed and finally killed. Peripheral, a smudge in a blur of brutality. As the moment of his death approaches, rather than beg for mercy, he spits in the face of his torturer.

This is where I always ground to a halt with theologians and priests. I went to take instruction while at Oxford, believing myself a Christian, only to find that I was a heretic. I argued that Christ lived as an example to us of what it took, if it needed to. He did not die that all our sins be forgiven, but that we should know how to purge ourselves of sin, to keep the context. The revolting manner of his death is the extreme example, and not all need to experience that. But if that is what it takes, that is what it takes. Socrates had a milder version, but the example is the same. “My friends, you ask me to escape; but to do that would be to do an unjust thing. What would it profit me to

breathe another summer or two, having at a stroke negated the work of the 70 summers that preceded them?"

Of the 150 maxims in and around the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, three were given prominence, "Know Thyself" being the most prominent, which echoes in Aquinas' definition of God as the perfect synthesis of essence and existence. ...to thine own self be true, And it must follow, etc. Yes, William, but how do I know mine own self and what is truth?

Christ in the wilderness was his withdrawing to remind himself not to get bogged down in politics, or become too familiar with his mortality. As I find in the cold sea, if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all. Physician, heal thyself. I can't do this for you. When your time comes to leave the world, you leave as you entered, alone, and bawling. That is, if you have not by that point understood that your body is a detail of biology and are prepared to let it be that. If you find yourself scrambling to hang on to your corporeal existence, you've missed something.

My niece left aged 20. She had a fit while swimming with her mother, one hot August day in a lake in Ludwigshafen, global home to BASF, to which megalith her father was wed his entire working life. BASF was part of the conglomerate that formed I.G. Farben in 1925, makers of the rat poison Zyklon B, which found fame in the camps. After the war, Agfa, BASF, Bayer, Hoechst et al went back to their former names, under which they continue to trade.

Z was mildly epileptic, but the condition had been controlled by meds since her childhood. I knew her all her life and never saw her have a fit, or even shows signs of one. I knew the signs from working part-time as a childcare assistant at the Eaton Hall School while at UEA. It lies, or lay, the far side of Eaton Park from the campus, and is/was a residential school for troubled children, one of whom suffered severe epilepsy.

The lake in which my niece drowned is one of hundreds in the area: the flooded pits from which the gravel had been dug to build the autobahns. Over the years, nature wound her way back to soften the scars, and they are places

of relaxation and rest during the steamy South German summers. Z was visiting her parents for a weekend. She and her mother were strong swimmers, her father a strong drinker, so they swam as he sat at an agreeable bar on the shore. At some point, she began flapping around. Her mother thought she was just being silly, but quickly realised what was happening. She swam over and took her child in her arms. As she told me later, she knew at that moment that she could let her go or go down with her. Dead weight. Divers recovered her mortal remains the next morning. Her father was on the beach to identify them. He said she looked peaceful.

Her mother would welcome a week of being scourged and nailed to a cross as light relief. It took me seven years to find a way to love Z's leaving us. She had chosen me her confidant as a child and told me all her troubles. I was the outsider, I guess; not part of the German familial core. We saw each other perhaps twice or three times a year. She had a painful childhood. Her father was BASF's *Our Man in Havana*, which saw him posted every four years to another country. This involved six months of finding a new home, finding new schools, and shipping their lives to a new culture: Morocco, South Africa, Turkey, France, back to Germany, and then off somewhere else. Her brother breezed through this. Tall, beautiful, a fine sportsman, intellectually gifted and extrovert. She was tall, beautiful, no kind of sportswoman, intellectually gifted and introvert. She was mercilessly bullied.

I think my niece is the closest thing to Ophelia I have known. Artless, loving, and so far from possessing the faculty of doing ill, let alone evil, that she could not process its expression in others, even when its darkness was shone on her. She asked me once, in Paris, in tears: "Why are they so nasty to me, Nick?" What could I answer? "Z, there are nasty people in the world. You are a beautiful person. Try to remember that, when you cry."

Fast forward a few years. She has finally finished school and is studying, and loving it, and living in a shared apartment with two other girls. The last time I saw her, in the early months of that year, she was radiant. After the

pain, the joy. You must needs have wished to die, to know how good it is to live. Dumas, père? When she left us, I howled, as the animal I am. I sang to her at her funeral, and collapsed in tears. I am weeping now. Why wasn't God watching her? He was.

My search for the nature of the g-word led me to the equation I sketched out for you yesterday. Logic suggests to me that it was coined to express the state of knowing and unknowing simultaneously, laced with wonder. That is how God can be all things and everywhere, with us at all times, asleep and awake, from entry to exit. God is consciousness – the condition of that which is called human. Ethics, the way we choose to express our existence, is conscience, the condition of applying the morality that is *innatus*.

Aquinas defined God as the perfect synthesis of essence and existence, and considered aspiring to that state the supreme goal, manifest among us in the person and example of Christ. When my niece left us, she was the perfect synthesis of essence and existence. No fibre of her being was in conflict. Wishful thinking? Perhaps. But there was oceanic peace in the eyes I looked into, that last time. It was unmissable, and unmistakable. I have seen it before, once, in the eyes of John Paul II. We sang for him, the choir of Lincoln College, on the steps of St Peter's, and he walked over and blessed us. He stood not two metres from me. His eyes were indicolite blue. If only for one day, my niece had been at peace with herself and the universe: she had known Truth, God, Love, call it what you will. Anyway, the opposite of that seen by Mistah Kurtz.

There was much prattle in the family about her having been robbed of her life, etc. I looked at the prattlers, saw the fear in their eyes, reminded by her example that they, like she, must pass, and not one of them ready; several having squandered six decades more of preparatory time. I believe Z left us a virgin. The 20-year-old who sat beside me that evening had no smell of woman on her. She had been violated by despair, but enfolded by ecstasy. She is as alive to me now as she ever was, and always will be. She is just not here, and when I weep, I weep for myself, for my loss, not for her, who left in peace. I miss her company.

Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace,
according to thy word:
For mine eyes have seen thy salvation.

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