

THE MANY-SPLENDURED THING

His disciples said to him: "When will the Kingdom come?" Jesus said: "It will not be a matter of saying, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is.' Rather the Kingdom of the Father is spread out upon the earth, and men do not see it." (Gospel of Thomas, 113)

This saying of Jesus cannot be found in the Bible. It comes from the Gospel of Thomas, which was found among dozens of other documents at Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt in 1945. An Arab peasant, digging around a boulder, chanced upon an old, red, earthenware jar. He smashed it - with some degree of trepidation because he felt there might be a genie inside - and discovered more than a dozen old papyrus books, bound in golden brown leather. Expecting treasure, he was no doubt disappointed to find manuscripts, but little did he realize that he had come across an extraordinary collection of ancient texts, buried, probably in the year 390 CE, to prevent their destruction by the emerging orthodox church in its violent attempt to eradicate all ideas that it considered heretical.

A Quite Different Jesus

Although many of these manuscripts can be confidently assigned to the third and fourth centuries, the Gospel of Thomas is thought by scholars to be considerably older, possibly even contemporary with the four Gospels that actually made it into the Christian scriptures. But the Jesus we find in the Gospel of Thomas is quite different from the one we find in the canonical Gospels. The Gospel of Thomas contains no account of the birth of Jesus and no account of his death and resurrection; in fact there is very little narrative at all, just 114 'logia' or sayings, the saying with which we began being number 113. And, far from being a dying and rising saviour, Jesus is presented as a guide who comes to illuminate and who promises that if we follow his teachings we will become like him. Indeed we will become him. In saying 108, Jesus, called 'the Living Jesus' in this Gospel, declares, "He who will drink from my mouth will become like me. I myself will become he, and the things that are hidden will be revealed to him."

The discovery of these manuscripts has demonstrated to scholars that in the early centuries of the Christian era, a number of radically different forms of Christianity existed side by side, and the one which triumphed, the one which emphasized a historical, flesh-and-blood Jesus as the literal Messiah of traditional Jewish expectation, attained its supremacy by persecution of another, more mystical strand, for whom the historical details of the life of Jesus were largely irrelevant. Strange as it may seem, seventeen centuries on, this tension still exists within Christianity, and the arguments which rage about the Trinity, the person and nature of Jesus, the physical resurrection of Jesus, are, in part, between those whose interpretation is historical and whose focus is ethical, and those whose approach is more poetic, and who see Christianity as one of a number of methodologies, perennially present among human beings, whose purpose is not primarily to teach us what to believe or how to act, but to teach us how to look. Nowhere is this tension felt more acutely than in Christian disagreement over the nature of the Kingdom of God. For some, perhaps the majority, the Kingdom of God is heaven, another world that the virtuous will live in after physical death; for others - and this time with more scriptural warrant - the Kingdom of God is an actual future time here on earth, when the lion will lie down with the lamb and human beings will study war no more. This is the Kingdom we imagine when we say the Lord's Prayer - that is, if we imagine anything, and our very familiarity with the words has not completely blunted their impact.

This second category - those who believe in a heaven on earth - is again divided into those, like the Jehovah's Witnesses for example, who believe that this will be brought about by the direct intervention of God, and those who hold that it will be built by the steady and determined effort of righteous people whose work in politics, education, medicine, scientific research and social welfare will gradually lead the human race out of strife and into Utopia.

Unitarian Gradualists Chipping Away

Unitarians, historically, have almost exclusively belonged to this latter category. We are gradualists, steadily chipping away at tyranny, injustice and ignorance. Our hymns declare our aims and our methods, and Felix Adler's hymn, 'Sing we of the Golden City', is typical of the genre. It tells us that we are helping to build that city - the Kingdom of God in Unitarian terms - 'oft with bleeding hands and tears'. It's a struggle, but we are confident of our eventual success. If we persist with our liberal agenda we will continue to progress 'onwards and upwards for ever'.

How different are all these approaches from the one we find in the Gospel of Thomas: "The Kingdom of the Father is spread out upon the earth and men do not see it." There's something wrong with our sight, it tells us. Our problems at root are not racism, sexism, poverty, inequality; these are just symptoms of a far more fundamental problem. We are seeing things wrongly and, until we learn to correct our vision, we are doomed to endure these problems and others not yet with us which will prove equally intractable.

What is really startling about this point of view is that it is not restricted to the Gospel of Thomas, nor even to the version of Christianity from which this Gospel springs. Nor is it found only in the ancient world. We find it in every age and in every place. It is truly perennial. The Hindu sages insist that what we ordinarily perceive is 'maya' - illusion, a view echoed by the Buddhists. 'The greatest obstacle to seeing is the eye; the greatest obstacle to hearing is the ear', say the Buddhist scriptures. Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity, too, in its mystical dimension, tell us that the natural condition of the human being is sleep and that the function of all genuine religious and spiritual practice is to wake us up. 'If the doors of perception were cleansed we would see everything as it is, infinite', writes William Blake, and, in more recent times, Francis Thompson, whose wonderful poem, *The Kingdom of God*, was our first reading, talks of 'our benumbed conceiving', our 'clay-shuttered doors' and 'our estranged faces' which miss the 'many-splendoured thing'. And, he warns us, in fixing our attention on Christ walking on the water in Galilee two thousand years ago (like the good historians we are), we fail to trace his footsteps today beside the Thames - or the Don, or the Avon, or the Nile or the Liffey.

I See ... The Heavenly Host

William Blake, who was fond of telling people that he looked through his eye, not with it, was once asked: "Mr Blake, when the sun rises do you not see a round disc of fire somewhat like a guinea?" "Oh, no, no!" replied Blake, "I see an innumerable company of the heavenly host crying, 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty!'" Imagine putting other questions to illuminati like Blake. "Mr Blake, when you look upon the world do you not see the same dull, stale, flat and unprofitable landscape that so bedeviled Hamlet, a place full of obstacles to overcome, or of possessions for you to grab?" "Oh, no, no! I see the body of God shimmering with untold wonder and magnificence, all of it provided for my education and my delight!" "Mr Blake, when you look at a human being, do you not see a product of blind natural forces which have conspired to create an animated machine which may be your enemy or your ally depending upon his usefulness to you?" "Oh, no, no! I see a child of God, a unique and precious soul with an eternal and glorious destiny, my brother or my sister, for whom the whole universe has been created!"

Sadly, we can't all see things as William Blake saw them. If we could, the Kingdom of God would most certainly have arrived already. However, just because, unlike the great mystics, we haven't been granted clarity of sight as a birthright, this is no reason for us to continue viewing the world myopically. The spiritual traditions tell us that we can learn to correct our vision and that, in one sense, it is very simple to do: we have to start by looking at things. "But," you may protest, "I look at things all the time." No you don't. Ordinarily, you no more see with your eyes than you hear with your ears or you communicate with your speech. For most of your life you are a passive receiver of visual impressions which is not nearly the same as being an attentive observer. In our somnambulism we rarely actually look at anything or listen to anything. This is why we constantly forget things. "Where are my keys?" "Where are my glasses?" "Where's my wallet?" We misplace things, or forget them every day because we live distractedly, inadvertently, even making a virtue out of our forgetfulness by imagining that it shows our unconcern with the mundane and trivial aspects of our existence. My mind is in higher realms, we fool ourselves into thinking. "I can never remember people's names," says a friend of mine. The reason he can never remember them is because he never learned them in the first place. When the name was announced to him he was too busy thinking about the impression he was making on this new person that he never even momentarily paid any attention to the name. How guilty are we all of this and similar inadvertence? 'To be awake is to be alive,' writes Thoreau in *Walden*. 'I have never yet met a man who was quite awake. How could I have looked him in the face?'

The Impediment Of Sight

In the Dublin congregation there's a woman called Beatrice Reid. Beatrice is a diabetic and has been completely blind for a number of years. After the service one day she commented on Jesus' question to the blind man, "Do you want to receive your sight?" "People might be inclined to consider it a stupid question, but it is profoundly important," said Beatrice, "because if I were asked a similar question I would say 'No'.

I have learned to 'see' things more clearly since I lost the impediment of sight." We should all ponder the implications of this.

'Now the eyes of my eyes are opened, And the ears of my ears awake,' says the Unitarian poet, e e cummings, emphasizing that there is a deeper level of awareness than that achieved in the normally passive exercise of our sensory apparatus. A seeker after wisdom once visited a spiritual teacher and asked for some advice to guide him on his path. The teacher wrote something on a piece of paper and gave it to the man. The paper contained only one word: 'Attention'. "Is that it? Just one word? Can't you elaborate? I've come a long way." "Certainly," replied the teacher. He took back the paper and wrote something else. This time it read: 'Attention, attention, attention'.

In Aldous Huxley's novel *Island*, written to show an alternative to the horrors of the *Brave New World* to which our spiritually impoverished culture seems to be inexorably headed, even the ubiquitous mynah birds have been trained to say, "Attention, attention, attention. Here and now boys, here and now." And in his essay on *Latent Human Potentialities*, Huxley tells of a Hindu text in which the God Shiva gives a list of 118 exercises which are useful in attaining the awareness of God. They are exercises covering every life situation, from eating one's dinner to sneezing, from going to sleep to making love, from having dreams to day-dreaming. Huxley comments that this is the most comprehensive series of exercises in awareness that he knows of, and he finds it curious that this 'immensely valuable psychological discovery has been allowed to remain as some sort of vague Oriental superstition which we haven't bothered about.' He may have found it curious but he would hardly have found it surprising. Of course we haven't bothered about it. Few people want to embark on radically transforming spiritual practice which demands consistent effort; most of us are far happier with religion, which gives us the illusion of spiritual activity, but without the work. And yet:

"Attention, attention, attention. Here and now boys (and girls), here and now." This, according to all the great spiritual traditions, is what spiritual living consists in. Virtue, righteousness, social responsibility and all the other big words in our religious vocabulary follow on from this. Prayer and meditation are little more than exercises in focusing attention. The great psychologist William James was undoubtedly right when he said that an education for developing sustained attention would be education par excellence.

Spiritual Graduation

It is as easy and, of course, as difficult as that. Stories abound in the world's spiritual literature making precisely this point. According to a Buddhist tale, a man spent ten years training to become a spiritual master. On the day of his final interview with his teacher, the day he was to become a teacher in his own right, he walked to the monastery in the rain. "When you left your wet clothes in the hall, did you place your umbrella on the right of your galoshes or on the left?" asked the teacher. "I don't remember," replied the student. "Then you are not yet ready to graduate. You must spend another ten years in training."

And from the Jewish tradition: 'Of all the things your holy rabbi does, which is the most important?' 'Whatever he happens to be doing at any particular moment is the most important thing he does.' The Jews also tell of a rabbi whose students did not go to him for verbal instruction; they went to watch him tie his shoelaces. Try this. Tomorrow, determine that you will do everything attentively. When you clean your teeth, just clean your teeth - don't think about the day's agenda. When you peel the potatoes, just peel the potatoes - don't be wondering how well the meal is going to be received. Pay attention to the food you are eating, to the texture as you bite it, to the taste of each mouthful, to the sensation it makes as it slips down your throat. Like Pat Ingoldsby in our second reading today, say thank you to the spider which has woven its magical web in your doorway; greet the snail climbing so painstakingly up your wall. The American poet, William Carlos Williams, kept a page in his notebook with the heading: 'Things I noticed today which I never noticed until today.' Try doing that.

The Difficulties Of Simplicity

If you do these things carefully you will realize that what seem like simple exercises are really extraordinarily difficult, because your mind will constantly wander as it tries to bring you back to sleepwalker mode, where it is most at ease. The mind loves the past and the future, but is terribly uncomfortable with the present. 'Humankind cannot bear too much reality', says T.S. Eliot, and this is the reason for the chaos in which we find ourselves. But the whole purpose of spiritual discipline is to increase our reality-tolerance level, because even enlightened liberals like ourselves must learn to live fully in the world before we can ever hope to change it. Learning to live fully in the world is why we come to church. Church is where we

remind each other what we may have forgotten; where we point out to each other the things we may have missed; where we help to sharpen each other's perceptions. And this is more important than doctrine or scripture or liturgy in bringing us to an awareness that 'the Kingdom of the Father is spread out upon the earth.' The transformation of the world for which we all long will not happen when stubborn things and people yield to the gradual and painstaking work of our 'bleeding hands': it will happen when 'the many-splendoured thing' reveals itself to the sudden illumination of our corrected sight.

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