

Homilies

Truth

Let us search together for the highest of all virtues. Be your body as fit as a tiger, your mind as sharp as a knife, and your heart as pure as a dove, you will come to nothing without Truth. The pursuit of Truth makes all other virtues possible. Without it, love itself is not possible, for you must first know yourself as you truly are and see what you love as it truly is. So I say to you, the highest virtue is this: seek Truth that you may find it; and having approached nearer to it, be guided by what you see. Even so, it is not in the indolent possession of Truth that real treasure lies, but in the unceasing labor to discover it.

How will you know if you love Truth? Unlike most other loves, you will prove your deepest love of Truth by being open to changing the perception of it. Accept that your most treasured beliefs are tentative; never tire of testing their truth. Be ever curious, and project your thought into the far reaches of time by studying the past and imagining the future. Realize that you only see through a glass darkly and, knowing no other glass, imagine it clear. You glimpse only a sliver of what is real, yet are tempted to think you see all. You are just one of millions of your species. Others who are no less worthy see the world differently, and you should strive to see through their eyes. So take pleasure in the open air of the market place, the deliberations of the assembly, and in the easy conversation of table fellowship. Truth is to be found in the midst of teeming life.

Do not think you must be pleased with the truth, just as you love your prodigal son, but hope he will mend his ways. A great test of courage is to believe the truth even when you wish it were not the truth. Of all truths, the most difficult to accept is this: when adversity frowns or fortune smiles, find not its origin in the heavens. Do not think, as in your infancy, that the universe is centered on you, or even attentive to you. Rather, make your own way in the world, and remember that time and chance happeneth to all.

Justice

Moral truths stand apart from God like mighty oaks unbent in strong winds. They roar trumpet-tongued above the din of poets. They are enshrined in the compact that makes our species one. Thanks to these truths, we have emerged from the ancient darkness and isolation of the cave to live in the light of great cities. Because of them, we have labored together so that for most, life is no longer solitary, brutish or short. But the law is not fixed in stone, nor immutably inscribed on a scroll. It is rather like a great tree that sends out branches and grows higher as it adapts itself to changing climate over thousands of years.

Begin with your stewardship of the earth: You have heard it said in the old time, "Let man have dominion over the creatures of the earth," but I say instead to you: The earth is not made for man, man is made for the earth. So our charge to preserve and protect the earth can even exceed the care we owe to one another.

Next, consider your species: Self-aware life is the most build stuff in all of creation, the very recent result of countless years of transformation spread across unimaginable distances of space. You are to delight in this capability, but also to look after it. This is a right and a responsibility that extends to all men and women who are, in this double and reciprocal sense, born equal.

Next, consider your neighbor: You have heard it said in the old time, "Thou shalt not steal," and I say to you: he who lives in luxury, while unseen others live without opportunity to better themselves, steals from those others as surely as if he robbed them at a knife's point.

Finally, think of your children: Whosoever shall offend one of these little ones, it were better to have a millstone hung about his neck, and that he be drowned in the depth of the sea. For a child's mind is the most cherished of all things. Children can be shown choices and taught how to sunder truth from untruth, but their minds must not be twisted to another's purpose. Each must freely decide the truths by which he will be guided. You have heard it said in the old time, "Honor thy father and thy mother," and I say to you: above even this you must honor your children.

Achievement

Adam did not sin, nor did God expel him. In the more profound myth, when Adam ate of the tree, like a wooden puppet that becomes a real boy, he changed from an ignorant, mechanical child into a mature human being who could feel the extremes of emotion, from anguish to ecstasy, and who could discriminate between good and evil and between truth and error. Like the hero of old, marooned in paradise, he chose to leave his dull, uneventful garden and venture into a brave new world more profoundly beautiful than he could know, fraught though it is with struggle and uncertainty. In truth, I say to you: life can have no meaning if it be without challenge.

So do not store up treasures in Heaven where, like sandcastles in the sky, they shall vanish in the wind. Gifts to God come to no avail. Remember that great temple on the hill? One day, like the castles in the sky, there was not one stone upon another that had not been thrown down. So lay up treasures on earth where you and others may take delight in them. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

The list of earthly treasures is long. A man long ago predicted an eclipse of the sun. Another measured the size of the earth without leaving his home. Another estimated the distance to the edge of the universe. Men discovered that the same rules that govern the motions of the planets and stars also regulate what happens on earth, from the cascade of the highest waterfall to the flight of a butterfly. They have dared guess that behind the seeming diversity and complexity of all things lies a hidden order and parsimony, with the basic economy that no thing can be destroyed, only transformed.

By now we have plumbed the depths of time and space, traveling by light untold years into the past, even to the moment of the creation, and distances undreamt into the heavens. By carefully examining rocks hiding in plain sight, we have peered into the long-ago past of the earth and learned how it transformed itself to become the lush green world with deep blue seas overflowing with life that we inhabit today. We have learned how continents were formed and reformed several times over by great clashing and separating plates of land, and how colossal animals once ruled the earth. We have begun decoding strands of instructions, up to now unnoticed but imprinted in each of us, describing how we are to be made and chronicling how all forms of life on earth emerged from earlier ones. Although each of us endures for only an instant in time, so far bound to a whirling speck of sand, the secrets of the universe are ours to discover. The evidence both surrounds and is within us.

The day has come when the biblical "miracles" of restored speech, hearing, sight, and motility seem like quaint antique tales told in our childhood. Now, we freeze time and speak over great intervals of space, turn the darkness of night into the light of day, experience events as they occur miles away even on the far side of the globe, and, like a race of supermen, lift ourselves above the surface of the earth and fly faster and higher than any bird.

In time, we have learned that the structure of all life, including humankind, is similar, and that more complex forms have developed out of simpler forms. After time without end, the most complex became capable of abstraction and, in its most glorious moment (apart from its birth), the universe at long last became conscious of itself.

Harmony

Your life task is to free yourself from the near-sighted delusion of your separateness, by widening the circle of your compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty. You will journey along a river of connection with its manifold tributaries and visit sites along its banks. You will seek out the lilies of the field, which nature clothes in glory, and you will find them. You may come to see there is harmony even in the fall of a sparrow. But you are not just a passing traveler: you can make a difference. You are not a block, you are not a stone, but flesh and blood, free to do good or evil. So I say to you, if you understand what gives life meaning, you will choose the good. Even in some small way, if you help humanity become more deeply or broadly aware, you will gain a kind of immortality. Such an endeavor has always been implicitly the common aspiration of humankind.

You have heard it said in the old time, "Love thy neighbor as thyself," and I say to you: whosoever belongs to humankind, that same is your neighbor.

You have heard it said, "Love your enemies," but I say instead to you: understand them, treat them with justice, and do not greet their misfortunes with joy in your heart. Be generous to those that might injure you; draw strength from the well of self-confidence and from trusting that liberality of mind can triumph over meanness of intent.

You have heard it said, "Resist not evil," but I say instead to you: whosoever, unlike a deeply rooted tree in a punishing wind, stands not resolutely against evil, is himself its accomplice. But when you first resist evil, forbear violence and do not respond like-for-like. Instead, steel yourself against its slings and arrows, stand your ground, expose injustice, meet force with scorn, and shame your oppressor into remorse.

Like the shadows in the window, it is not death we should fear: when we are, death is not come, and when death is come, we are not. Is not what is before the beginning also after the end? The great human evils — torture and cruel punishment, slavery, rape, racial bigotry and religious prejudice, child abuse and mind control, spoiling the joys of sexuality, and the destruction of accumulated knowledge and profound works of art and literature, the hard-won by-products of our kind — these we should fear.

But do not go so far as to o'er leap the bounds of civility and needlessly impose your judgment upon others. Do not be angry with your neighbor for doing as he likes, and do not jealously pry into his affairs looking for fault. Your most pressing challenges will be to learn to care for one another, to provide opportunity to the least fortunate amongst you, and to define the thin line between individual freedom and collective restraint — all the while being steadfastly guided by the aspiration of making the interest of each individual and of the whole of society one and the same.

The Future

As we look together into the seeds of time, we see that our kind began, not in a Golden Age, but in squalor, competing for food amidst many dangers. Our time on earth was bitter and short. But ever so slowly we raised ourselves out of the dirt and dust and cultivated the earth.

A perfected world may never come, but if it does, it will not be the work of God, but of countless men and women who have labored for many years. This world is like a vast library to which all come to read books, new and old, gathered from the ends of the earth. It is like a great conversation in many tongues carried on for years by men and women, some awake but most evermore asleep. It is like a ship that traverses the empty space between the stars, spreading the seed of its voyagers throughout the universe, doing their will in the heavens as it is done on earth.

When this other-Eden, this demi-paradise, is built, all who dwell on earth will know that out of the industry and wisdom of their forefathers, poverty, sickness and war have come to an end, and even aging and death may be no more. The secrets of life and of consciousness will stand revealed. One brilliant day we may discover that our rational and self-conscious species is not alone in the universe.

The way is uncertain. As our kind uncovers the secrets of time and space, and learns of what things are made, as we grow in numbers and power over the natural world, we will have only ourselves to fear. Our severest test will be to master our own nature. Whatever you do, do not surrender your mind to the sway of another, especially one who claims the authority of God, for then you sacrifice your greatest treasure on the altar of improvidence. Never believe because another believes; your own reason is the only oracle given to you.

You have heard it said that faith must come before understanding, but I say instead to you: faith appears like a clown of a thousand and one faces, only one unpainted. Likewise will faith come before a thousand errors and one truth. The curse of faith is our gravest danger. Some few will surrender their intellect and turn the great power we have accumulated over nature against ourselves, from the misguided certainty that by so doing they will crush evil and earn glory for themselves in Heaven. So I do not know: all our achievements will either end in fire or ice, or poisoned oceans and skies, or perhaps the brave new world we hope to build will come to pass. But I do know, in the end our destinies are joined: if you do not look after your brother, you shall fail to safeguard even yourself.

So send not to know for whom the bell tolls: it tolls for all.

Man, God and False Gospel

You have heard it said in the old time, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me," but I say instead to you: a man cannot mount two horses; he cannot draw two bows. So too, no man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or he will hold to the one, and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Truth. For if you serve God, you serve the unseen and unknown which lies beyond understanding.

You have heard it said in the old time, "God created man in His own image," but I say instead to you: man created his god to look and be like him. For what God actually is, no ear hath heard, no eye hath seen, nor can it yet be conceived by the mind of man. Likewise, how do you know the Scroll is the will of God? None that is born of woman can know such high things: he is but a dim candle striving vainly to be as bright as the sun. Indeed, the one truth the man of wisdom knows for sure is that he does not know for sure.

You have heard it said in the old time, "Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain," and I say to you: let no one be obliged to say, hear or see His name, for that also is blasphemy. Moreover, it were better that you not know His name, lest you should ever speak it. You must not use His name, lest you call Him by one name, and your brother call Him by another, and that will make you enemies.

Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing. Though they shall seem to speak with the tongues of angels, they come to deceive. By these signs you shall know them: They shall prophesy what is to be when they know not what has been. They shall promise a glorious future that will come tomorrow but that morrow never comes. They shall frighten with visions of punishment that are unspeakable but do not occur. They shall claim you are hopelessly sinful and only through them is your eternal salvation possible. They will demand that you trust them with the innocence of a child, while they profess truths that they say can never be amended. They shall tailor the present to match the past, and mine the past to prove it foretells the present. They shall deceive you with metaphor and confound you with paradox, and tell you stories that evoke your emotion with such power that it clouds your reason.

These prophets have come under the banner of the cross and have spread their false gospel to all nations. They seek power over you with a terrifying deception about Hell, and a book that makes virtue a sin and sin a virtue. They tell you that a "Kingdom of Heaven" will come without your stir. Yet, when a dark age descended upon the earth, they held back the advance of civilization for a thousand years. Their differences were slight or imagined, yet faith drove their followers to war against each other. They claim, in all seriousness, that you can evade personal responsibility for wrongdoing by simply believing that the death of another being can serve as an atoning sacrifice!

But overcoming this baneful influence, a perfected world may at last come to pass, now that the true gospel has been resurrected and brought into the light.