

The Gospel

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In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost.

It is of the Gospel that I wish to say a few words to you. In countries that are nominally Christian or allegedly Christian it is very difficult for one to recapture the true meaning of the word and of the event of the Gospel. What is the Good News? What is new in it? What is good in it? Those of us who discovered the Gospel as a new life may perhaps feel that more intensely whether we are people of the East or people of the West. What is news? O, something very wonderful and very simple - it is life but only those who were ill can know what it means to be whole, only those who were dead can appreciate what it means to be alive.

In one of his broadcasts in 1943 C.S.Lewis said, "What should happen to those who meet a Christian, a believer? They should stop arrested by what they see and exclaim, "Lo, a statue has come to life!" That is, something that was nothing but stone, beautiful or not, but inert, insensitive, which could not hear or speak, of a sudden has become a living being. Can you imagine what would happen to people if all of us who call ourselves by the name of Christ were such that people encountering us should say, "Look, this is a living being and because I have met him or her I understand now that I don't know yet what it means to be alive. I am a corpse, I am half dead, there is no life in me, and in these people there is life."

I would like to single out a few elements of newness also in what one may discover in the Gospel and to do this, I am afraid, I will be a little too personal for the taste of Britain. I was baptized an Orthodox when I was a child but then the first World War came, the revolution came, the bitter and hungry and painful years of emigration. And there was no time for me to receive any kind of religious education so that God did not exist for me. I was not an atheist by conviction (one is not an atheist at the age of 7 and 10, and 12, and 15) but I was an atheist in the truer sense of the word - there was no God in my experience, no God in my life. And therefore there was no ultimate meaning in my life, all the meaning of life could be summed up in the necessity of survival. There was no common roof for my parents and me, there was food when it happened to be there and there was a great deal of violence and hardship around. So that all my vision of life was that of a struggle and all my understanding of people around me was that of a jungle peopled by prospective enemies.

And then one day I happened to read the Gospel. It happened by the act of God as it were because it happened in order for me to discard it. I heard a priest speak to us, boys, in a youth organization and what he said shocked me, revolted me so much that I decided to check whether what he had said could possibly be true. We were teenagers, preparing to re-conquer Russia sword in hand and here was a man who spoke of Christ and spoke of nothing but meekness, humility, forbearance, turning one cheek when one was hit on the other, giving us an image of what was no manly. I came home determined to make sure and to finish with the Gospel if that was the Gospel and that was Christ. I counted the chapters of the Gospels because as I expected no good from the reading I thought that the shortest would be the best and so I was landed with St. Mark's Gospel, a Gospel written for young ruffians like me, the youth of pre-Christian Rome.

And then something happened to me which you may interpret either as a hallucination or as a gift of God - between the beginning of the first and the end of the second chapter of his Gospel, of St. Mark's Gospel, I suddenly became aware with total, absolute certainty that on the other side of the desk the Lord Jesus Christ was standing alive. There was no hallucination of the senses - I heard nothing, saw nothing, smelt nothing, I looked and my certainty remained as total and as totally convincing. And then I thought that if

Christ is alive, if I am in his presence, then the man who died on Calvary was truly what is purported him to be, the man who died on Calvary was God come to us as a Saviour.

And then I began to read the Gospel with new eyes in a different way. I turned pages simply to read other passages than the one I had read about the beginnings and I landed on a passage that said in St. Matthew's Gospel that God shines his light upon the good and the evil. And I sat back and I thought, "All my life I've been surrounded by people whom I considered as enemies, who to me were like beasts of prey, people of whom I was terrified and whom I wanted to fight, people who had taught me that the only way of survival was to become as hard as nails - and God loves them all. And if I want to be with God I must learn to love them whatever they may do to me because if I reject them I will not be with God, I will not be with Christ who on being crucified said, "Father, forgive, they don't know what they are doing." Who said to Judas who had come to betray him, "Friend, why thou hast come hither?" I did not know these examples but that is what I perceived.

And I remember coming out into the street the next morning, going to the suburban train that will bring me to my school and crowds of people to their work and I looked round at all these people moving towards the station that had been so alien, that were to me prospective danger, tormentors, enemies, whom I wanted to ignore and fight if necessary, I looked at them and thought, "God loves them all! O, the wonder! - we are in a world of love. Whatever they may feel about me I know what they may not know themselves". This was my first experience, this was a moment when I suddenly felt that I was alive and that I had been dead. I had been a corpse among corpses, now I was alive among people who, who knows, perhaps were as alive as I, or, horror of horrors, were corpses that needed come to life. And with the foolishness of a boy of 14-15, pressed in these carriages of the suburban train I turned to my neighbor and said, "Have you ever read the Gospel?" He looked at me condescendingly, smiled and said, 'Now, why should I?' And then I told him what I had just discovered. He probably thought I was mad. And I was and I am still and I hope that this madness will never leave me because from that moment onward I felt there was no point in life except in whatever way of life, in whatever walk of life you are to proclaim the Gospel, to proclaim this miracle that the Gospel is a power of life, that Christ can give us life. And by contrast that as long as we are not possessed of the life which Christ can give we are dead whatever we imagine.

And then I discovered other things. I discovered the parable of the prodigal son and that was such a wonderful experience because that corroborated what I have felt within myself. Twice does the father say, "My son, your brother was dead and he is now alive." He says that to the servants, he says that to the older son, he knew what it meant to be alive, and he knew what it meant to be dead. The prodigal son knew also what it meant to die and to resurrect. He was partaker after a fashion in the experience of Lazarus who had come to life after having, tasted death. The older son did not know that, in his imagination his younger brother had gone into the far country, enjoyed life seeing things which he, faithful servant, slave, hireling of his father, had never seen. Perhaps was he jealous of him but he certainly did not feel that he missed or had lost anything. And so what was there to be rejoiced at when he came back? And why was it that the father was so happy to see him back instead of saying, "No, you have squandered all my goods, go and earn your living." He did not know what it meant to be dead because he had never been alive.

And then I discovered something more. I discovered an answer (o, that didn't come immediately) to a question that puzzled me - how could it be that God could know what it means to be a creature? How could the Immortal One know what it means to be dead? What could the Eternal One know how one can lose even the transitory, ephemeral life which is ours? And then I realized that God in his Incarnation had

become one with our creatureliness, he had not only a human body and a human soul, he had inherited this body and soul from generations back, he was the heir of centuries and centuries of humanity, of real, concrete people. He was true man, the only true man because to be a true man means to be a man in perfect oneness with God, partaker of divine nature, as Peter the Apostle puts it in his Epistle. The union of divinity and humanity had made his humanity not less human but more truly human. He knew what it meant to be a human being, he knew what it meant to be alive. Did he know what it meant to be dead?

Later I discovered the Cross. On the same evening, turning pages (the way I put it now of course could not have been the thing I perceived and put it when I was a boy in my middle teens) what I discovered was this - that Christ had chosen as it were simultaneously to be totally solid with God and totally solid with man, at one with God, at one with man. And that had two tragic consequences - because he stood before man in God's name, in total solidarity with him, without any compromise, he had become unacceptable to all those who were not prepared to accept God on his terms, on God's own terms, to be God's own people in a real full, sacrificial, heroic sense. And because he has chosen to remain in total, ultimate solidarity with man before the face of God he had to share with mankind all the predicament of being a creature, of living in fallen world, of being a man who had brought through sin mortality and death. And so he had to be rejected by mankind, he had to die outside of the city of men as the Anglican hymn has it "on the little hill without the walls," not within Jerusalem, not within the company of men, outside, like the scape-goat who was loaded with the sins of Israel and cast out to die in the wilderness. On the other hand he could not die because in his very humanity inseparably, perfectly united to his divinity there was no space for dying and yet, he chose to share with us the only ultimately tragic predicament of mankind - He chose mortality and death and this he did on the Cross, something happened that he became unaware of his unity with the Father and having lost God he had to die, he could die and he could go down into the pit, into the Hades, into sheol of the Old Testament, the place of the irremediable and ultimate separation from God. He came down into it as a man and he filled it with the glory of his divine presence, harrowing hell, making an end to it. He had united God and man in his person, he called every human being to unite himself to him and through him to become the son or the daughter of God. What a marvel, what a wonder!

That is what the Gospel meant to me when I began to discover it. And I ask you to look at it with the eyes of one who was alien to the Gospel, who knew nothing about it and to ask yourself, "What is there in the Gospel which is new to you, not yet ever experienced, never known and what is in the Gospel which is so good that one can turn..."