

The Brightness of Bones

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Several weeks ago I had a dream in which I was at the South Pole in the bowels of a ship. All was silent, all was wrapped in a thick darkness, and I was alone, dressed in black clothing. Suddenly I noticed that my black shirt had an imprint resembling an x-ray, of my own bones. Perhaps oddly, in my dream I felt tremendous relief, as if “yes, finally.”

It would be easy to associate my dream with death and deathly things. Yet, as a third order Carmelite, my waking mind immediately went to the dark night I had been experiencing for almost three years. I was at the bottom, the outermost reach, the south pole of experience. I had been dragging through this murky spiritual darkness for what seemed like an eternity, and I had no idea what course was plotted, and no idea what the destination resembled. All that I knew for certain was the slow and painful stripping away of self in ways I did not know I could be stripped away.

So the bones were a sign of wonderment, a sign of relief, a glimpse of the bedrock. Yes, I had been stripped, it said – to the bone.

The sixteenth-century Carmelite John of the Cross taught in his writings that God seeks to touch and transform individual souls with the goal of uniting them to himself. To this end God may plunge a soul into a painful “dark night,” first of the senses, then a more rigorous night of the spirit. The purpose, according to St. John of the Cross, is to purify and strip a soul in order that it may be fit to draw increasingly closer to God, and ultimately, to be drawn into union with God.

John describes these nights as excruciatingly painful experiences, yet also as highly effective and transformative. He famously describes God's action upon the soul as a fire burning a log, a fire which burns all the impurities away first, and then transforms the log into fire itself: "The very fire of love that afterward is united with the soul, glorifying it, is what previously assailed it by purging it, just as the fire that penetrates a log of wood is the same that first makes an assault on the wood, wounding it with the flame, drying it out, and stripping it of its unsightly qualities until it is so disposed that it can be penetrated and transformed in the fire."¹ This purifying action of God penetrates and strips a person to the core in order to ready her or him for a transformation, a rebuilding which involves a new and mysterious interweaving of human and divine. In the language of theologians, the *kenosis* or stripping away of self prepares the way for the *theosis* of divine union.

The prophet Ezekiel was called to a difficult ministry. He was to prophesy that Israel would be stripped and punished for her idolatry, for the purpose of her purification. This prophecy was realized in his own lifetime, when the city of Jerusalem fell to the Chaldeans (Ezk 33:21), and most of its inhabitants were taken captive. But then the tone of the book of Ezekiel shifts. Ezekiel began to prophesy about a regeneration and renewal of Israel. Through his prophet the Lord promises to restore Israel, clean and transformed, and ready anew for right relationship with the Lord. The vision of Ezekiel which provides the hinge of the book, and the hinge of Israel's fate, involves bones.

In his vision, the Lord shows Ezekiel a plain of dry bones, which represents the ravaged and ruined Israel, and makes him walk among the bones. He asks Ezekiel, "Son of man, can

¹John of the Cross, *The Living Flame of Love*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross* (Washington: ICS Publications, 1991) 648.

these bones come to life?” (Ezk 37:3), and then asks Ezekiel to prophesy over the bones:

“Prophesy over these bones, and say to them: Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! Thus says the Lord God to these bones: See! I will bring spirit into you, that you may come to life. I will put sinews upon you, make flesh grow over you, cover you with skin, and put spirit into you so that you may come to life and know that I am the Lord.” (Ezk 37:4-6).

Ezekiel does prophesy over the bones, and witnesses a remarkable reconstitution of the bones in what we might imagine as a reversal of death and decay, but described in Ezekiel as new life and a kind of resurrection. “I heard a noise; it was a rattling as the bones came together, bone joining bone. I saw the sinews and the flesh come upon them, and the skin cover them The spirit came into them; they came alive and stood upright” (Ezk 37:7-8, 10). The Lord declares, “O my people, I will open your graves and have you rise from them” (Ezk 37:12).

The image of the dry bones being penetrated and enlivened by the prophetic word of God speaks to our spiritual experience as God’s people. He dries us, strips what is unnecessary and harmful away; a painful process marked by deep loss. Yet ultimately this process accomplishes God’s loving and extraordinary purpose of making us whole again, a renewed creation readied for divine love and union. He opens the throat of our grave and restores us, drawing us from our own misery and darkness into a new and more brilliant kind of light and life. Our divine craftsman works purposefully even if slowly at times: he metaphorically first rejoins bones, then puts sinew upon them, causes flesh to grow, skin to cover, and, in an unmistakable echo of Genesis creation, the spirit “breathe[s] into these slain that they may come to life” (Ezk 37:9). Our God is a God of not only creation but also re-creation, restoration and new life, even and especially in the context of our earthly lives filled with uncertainty and struggle. Moreover, what may seem like loss, darkness, and even death may paradoxically hide our salvation – the gain of

a new life in and through the gentle workings of the One who can always be trusted to transform, restore, and love.

Jesus Christ himself provided this paradoxical model for us in his cross – his crucifixion and death gave rise to resurrection and life. Perhaps this is not an easy paradox for us to accept, and it is definitely a challenging one to live. Yet, if we look at the lives of the saints who have gone before us, the common golden thread in their lives is this pattern of Jesus Christ and his paradoxical cross. Even across a wide spectrum of time, individual personalities and circumstances, the saints each exhibit the ability to look past the difficulty and loss, and perceive what is gained from a heavenly perspective. Why else would St. Francis of Assisi reject his family wealth and status to become an itinerant preacher living in abject poverty? Or why would St. Maximilian Kolbe volunteer to take the place of a stranger and die in an Auschwitz gas chamber? Or why would Mother Teresa give her love and life without reserve to the people of the slums of Calcutta? In the saints we can detect the sure and immovable insight that earthly loss and death may culminate in heavenly gain and life.

According to John of the Cross, this pattern of the paradoxical cross can be found also in our spiritual experience. In opening ourselves freely to the operation of God in darkness and pain, perhaps in a “dark night,” we go by a dark and blind way, in complete unknowing. Yet our trust in the path of God for us, even one involving darkness, pain and loss, will certainly come to fruitful and effective transformation and gain. The disintegration becomes an altogether new and stunning integration; as John says, “The death of this soul is changed to the life of God.”²

²John of the Cross 671.

So perhaps my dream was about a sort of death after all, yet one which brings relief, gain and life. I am not sure how long I will remain alone at the South Pole in the darkness, below the waterline, stripped to my bones. But I am grateful for the dazzling glimmers of hope I find in those very same bones – a tangible reminder that God strips us in order to transform and restore, and bring us ever closer to his wonderful light.

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