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Duke Divinity School Chapel
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November 21, 2013 – C. S. Lewis (1898-1963)

1 Peter 1.3-9
Psalm 139.1-9
John 16.7-15

In his famous sermon, "The Weight of Glory," preached in the University Church of St. Mary the Virgin in Oxford on June 8th, 1941, C. S. Lewis attempted, with all of the very considerable rhetorical powers under his command, to awaken, or perhaps re-awaken, *desire* within his listeners. Not just any desire, however, but desire for heaven, or what he calls "a desire that no natural happiness will satisfy." But first he needed to convince his listeners that desire itself is a good thing, not a bad one. Our problem, he says, is not that we desire *too much*, but rather that we don't desire *enough*. We are, he says, "half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered to us…. We are far too easily pleased."

But then, just when he is getting into his stride and explaining how we are made for what he calls a "transtemporal, transfinite good," a good that cannot be found in this world, Lewis suddenly realizes that there is something potentially problematic about what he is doing to his listeners. He says:

> In speaking of this desire for our own far-off country, which we find in ourselves even now, I feel a certain shyness. I am almost committing an indecency. I am trying to rip open the inconsolable secret in each one of you—the secret which hurts so much that you take your revenge on it by calling it names like Nostalgia and Romanticism and Adolescence; the secret also which pierces with such sweetness that when, in very intimate conversation, the mention of it becomes imminent, we grow awkward and affect to laugh at ourselves; the secret we cannot hide and cannot tell, though we desire to do both. We cannot tell it because it is a desire for something that has never actually appeared in our

> experience. We cannot hide it because our experience is constantly suggesting it, and we betray ourselves like lovers at the mention of a name.

Both the theme and the language of this 1941 sermon take us into the heart of what I think C. S. Lewis still has to offer contemporary readers, namely an intense articulation of ourselves as essentially incomplete *desirers* who are radically *confused* about our true good, and who thus need *help* in finding it. This 1941 sermon also lays bare Lewis's theological and rhetorical agenda vis-à-vis his readers and listeners: a theological and rhetorical agenda that explicitly employs both pleasure and pain, *eros* and *agon*, in ways that may trouble us, but which may also provoke surprising insights and open up transformative experiences, insights and experiences that are vital to Christian faith and life but which are often neglected or even ignored by the contemporary Church.

Another way of putting all this is to say that Lewis was deeply attuned to our passage from First Peter, Chapter 1. That is, Lewis was convinced that we *do* have "an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven" for us, and that we *are* "being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time." And, to the extent that Lewis boldly emphasized these vivid eschatological themes, he stood against various currents in 20th century Western theology, currents that diminished, downplayed, or deemphasized the hope of heaven as a legitimate source of human concern or aspiration.

But, of course, the passage from First Peter doesn't stop there, but continues: "In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to *suffer* various trials, *so that* the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed." And this takes us to the heart of yet another of Lewis's primary concerns,

namely the problem of pain and suffering understood in purgative and redemptive terms. Let me say right away that I'm not at all happy with some of Lewis's more theoretical attempts at theodicy, but I am fascinated by the honest and yet often disturbing ways in which he grapples with the agonistic character of Christian faith and life and the inevitably painful confrontation between a holy God and sinful humans en route to final redemption.

Perhaps the most shocking example of this can be found in *Mere Christianity*, in the chapter "Is Christianity Hard or Easy?" Here Lewis explains Christ's command to take up our cross by saying that it is like "being beaten to death in a concentration camp". How's that? *"What's it like being a Christian?" Oh, it's like being beaten to death in a concentration camp.* It would be difficult to think of a more horrific analogy for the Christian life—but of course being beaten to death in a concentration camp is no less horrific than crucifixion…and that's Lewis's point. There is no non-horrific way to put it. Less shocking are Lewis's analogies in that same book of human beings as houses that are being remodeled or statues being brought to life: in both cases this process of transformation is imagined to be painful. Why is it painful? Because our ultimate destiny is perfection—and we have a long way to go. Examples of such painful perfecting could be multiplied from Lewis's work: the Ghost with the Red Lizard in *The Great Divorce*, the un-dragoning of Eustace Clarence Scrubb in *The Voyage of the "Dawn Treader"*, the ordeals of Mark and Jane in *That Hideous Strength*, the entire life of Orual in *Till We Have Faces*, and so on. It's a long list.

But, wait, what about desire? What happened to desire? Didn't we begin with Lewis's concern to awaken or re-awaken our deep *desire* for God and heaven? Yes, but

for Lewis as for Shakespeare "the course of true love never did run smooth". Always there are obstacles within and without that require removal. Lewis doesn't avoid telling us about those obstacles, and I think that's one reason why people often find his work compelling: both the brutal honesty with which he depicts the difficulty, and the burning passion with which he describes the desire. Having said that, however, I think that finally desire and delight are more important to Lewis than pain and suffering.

In his recent book, *The Lion's World: A Journey into the Heart of Narnia*, Rowan Williams says that Lewis wants to depict a world in which profound physical enjoyment "is one of the best and clearest images of what it is to meet God". In Chapter 3, "Not a Tame Lion", he focuses on the strange wildness of the Christ-like Great Lion Aslan, Son of the Emperor-Beyond-the Sea. Williams underlines the daring way in which Lewis subtly evokes a non-sexual but still erotic element in the children's relation to the Great Lion—stroking his perfumed mane and so forth—in order to convey what Williams describes as "overwhelming physical enjoyment as a glimpse of the divine". This is not about understanding *eros* in spiritual terms but rather, in the classical mystical manner, understanding spirituality in terms of *eros*—that is to say, desire.

Perhaps my favorite example of this has to do, not with Aslan's interaction with the human children, but with one of the Talking Animals of Narnia. In the book *The Horse and His Boy*, a mare named Hwin sees Aslan for the first time. Lewis writes:

> Then Hwin, though shaking all over, gave a strange little neigh, and trotted across to the Lion.
>
> "Please," she said, "you're so beautiful. You may eat me if you like. I'd sooner be eaten by you than fed by anyone else."
>
> "Dearest daughter," said Aslan, planting a lion's kiss on her twitching, velvet nose, "I knew you would not be long in coming to me. Joy shall be yours."

Commenting on this passage, Paul F. Ford writes, "This is a moment of high mysticism. Hwin experiences the terror and the beauty of Aslan and draws near, almost eager to be devoured. She meditates on this experience for two hours." With all due respect to Ford, yes, this is a moment of high mysticism, but it is also a moment of high *eros*. Hwin desires union with Aslan so deeply that she's willing to accept it on any terms, even if that means being consumed by him. "Joy shall be yours", Aslan tells her when she finally sees him—and this is also First Peter's message to us: "Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls."

So then, what about us? How do *we* perceive and respond to the terror and beauty of God? How deeply do we desire union with Christ, and on what terms? Rather than being consumed *by* him, lion-like, in Christ's lamb-like humility he invites *us* to consume *him*. And so, as we come forward to receive the bread and wine of the Eucharist, let us say to our Crucified, Risen, and Ascended Lord: "Please, you're so beautiful: we'd sooner eat you than be fed anything else."