

July 8, 2007
Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

ALL THINGS BRIGHT AND BEAUTIFUL

And God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.
And there was evening and morning, the sixth day. *Genesis 1:31*

During the early seventies, no doubt like many of you I came across a beautiful poem by Max Ehrman called "Desiderata." Three short lines have always stayed with me.

With all its sham,
drudgery, and broken dreams,
it is still a beautiful world.

We don't need to desensitize ourselves to the needs of the world, certainly. But in a T.V. network's clamor to create a news program that claims our attention, or an hour of investigative reporting that will keep us tuned in, a certain sensationalism is inevitable, even to the point of voyeurism. The point is, that even in the midst of its sham, as Ehrman puts it, this is still a beautiful world.

Few people have captured the spirit of God's simple providence for our world as well as Cecil Frances Alexander. She wrote the beloved "All Things Bright and Beautiful" as a children's hymn. It speaks with the voice of a child through the mind of a child. It speaks with such simplicity of the "little flower that opens . . . the purple headed mountain . . . the pleasant summer sun" and how "the Lord God made them all." The cynic, with a rueful shake of the head, may decry the simplistic in the hymn, yet it touches a necessary truth with perfect innocence. Whether we prefer to think of God's creation as evolutionary patience, or as *creation ex nihilo* in the twinkling of an eye, God stands behind all the unanswered questions and the unfathomable beauty of this earth as the one whom faith credits with the making. Our God is the author and sustainer.

This is a beautiful world. Perhaps your summer has given you some moments to smell the roses and drink in its goodness in the spirit of W. H. Davies' poem, "Leisure," my mother's favorite.

What is this life if, full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare?—

No time to stand beneath the boughs,
And stare as long as sheep and cows:

No time to see, when woods we pass,
Where squirrels hide their nuts in grass:

No time to see, in broad daylight,
Streams full of stars, like skies at night:

No time to turn at Beauty's glance,
And watch her feet, how they can dance:

No time to wait till her mouth can
Enrich that smile her eyes began?

A poor life this if, full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare.

Or this little gem from A.A. Milne's, *Winnie the Pooh*. "If you stood on the bottom rail of a bridge, and leant over, and watched the river slipping slowly away beneath you, you would suddenly know everything that there is to be known." I hope you find such moments. I hope, too, that you adults have had a chance to lay aside the mantle of sophistication and see the world as a child again.

A few days ago, on Tuesday, I took lovely long bike ride from Perkiomen Park on the river trail through Coatesville toward Schwenksville. It started to rain quite heavily—which made it all the more enjoyable—and near my turn-around point I passed a bench in the middle of the woods, quite isolated. A couple of minutes later, with the rain

swamping down through the forest canopy and the sunlight still dancing among the branches, I returned to the bench, took a few gulps of Gatoraid, and sat down. Then I saw why the bench was located just there. Fifty feet away across the cinder path was a magnificent oak tree, as old as the civil war, and as battle scarred, but still magnificent. For twenty minutes I sat there in gratitude, drinking in its splendor, its durability, its companionship, its sheer size, its immensely long branches reaching out to claim a massive living room in all directions. Summertime. Perhaps you'll let me reminisce for a moment, in the spirit of summertime. I promise, eventually, to lead us somewhere important.

Last February, on a trip back to see family in the UK, I took a day to meander through Westmoreland. It brought back fond remembrances of childhood in spring and summertime.

I up grew in Lancashire in northwest England. It was a heavily industrial area, yet like so many places in that compacted land there is always some wide open country close by. Preston is near the coast, on the windward side of the hill country that separates east from west. Just a few miles north west of town are the anachronistic high moors of the Forest of Bowland. I call them that because they had been as bald as a monk since the middle ages when all the trees were cut down and the thin soil permitted no new growth. It was great sheep country, though. And just sixty miles to the north was the sister terrain of Westmoreland and the Lake District stretching eventually into Scotland.

When I was about ten we bought our first car, a little two-tone blue station wagon called a Vauxhall Standard, and Dad took us on a Sunday drive to what seemed, then, like the ends of the earth. We drove sixty miles to Westmoreland. He wanted to show us where he had spent his boyhood summers. So on a perfect English summer's day, with the temperature hovering in the high seventies, we drifted round high banked country lanes meandering between what seemed like a thousand miles of dry stone walls, and through villages that time had been content to pass by. They had names like King's Meaburn and Maud's Meaburn and Crosby Ravensworth and Appleby. They looked like villages from James Herriot's *All Creatures Great and Small*, with one important exception: these villages were in red rose country on the east of the Pennines. And if you were born in Lancashire you didn't talk too fondly about those white rose ne'er-do-wells to the west in Herriot's Yorkshire. They do have some redeeming features, none-the-less: they play a decent game of cricket, and are known for Yorkshire pudding. The recipe was given, tradition has it, by an angel to a Yorkshire woman in the Yorkshire moors. The angel was supposed to deliver it to a housewife in Lancashire, but got lost in the fog and finished up in Yorkshire.

Anyway, it was a blissful day. With a few topographical changes we could have been meandering through Thomas Hardy's mythic Wessex in the early nineteenth-century. I listened to a new side of my father as he told of boyhood escapades during summers among these rolling, ancient hills. How they hid the policeman's bicycle under the foot bridge that was still there—the bridge that is. I could see my Dad in knee britches and cloth cap, stumbling over the moors, knee deep in great tufts of wiry, straw tinted grass. I pictured him making rock dams in the burns that rushed and bubbled down from the high, common land of the open moors, and roasting potatoes in the glowing embers of a night fire. Did we still have any relatives in these parts? I asked, hopefully.

We did, sort of. Later that day, captivated by their whitewashed stone, seventeenth century farmhouse (the huge stone lintel over the front door reads, "1640"), and by the great milking bier (that's the barn) we drove home with the promise that I could come back next spring. And I did, many times. Spring was my favorite season because it meant the lambing season. There were long hours in the fields and deep, exhausted sleeps, and Auntie May's apple pies topped off with the thick head of fresh cream from the milk vat that I would be daily sent to pillage with a white jug with a blue ring around it. And when the heavy boots of my uncle John crunched past my door on the way to morning milking at 4:30 a.m., and he would bang on my door without so much as breaking stride, my eyes would be as heavy as that clotted cream.

I learned so much. I learned about how fragile life is. And how full of wonder is God's world in a way that only the wide-eye innocence and awe of a child can drink in. I learned how dependant we all are on each other: animals, people, the earth—everything. I learned about Christ, too. Although, at the time, I had no sense that it was he whom I was learning about. Let me explain.

During lambing season in the spring it's not unusual for a mother sheep to die in the process of labor, or conversely for a lamb to die at birth. So, almost every year the farmer is left with a few orphaned lambs and a fairly equal number of sheep who are producing milk but have lost lambs. But sheep, like many other animals, recognize their own not by sight but by smell, and they will not allow a strange lamb, no matter how needy, to nurse from them. How, then, to keep the orphaned lambs from dying. The solution seems a little grisly, but it worked. We would carefully skin the fleece in a single piece like a seamless garment from the carcass of the dead lamb. Then we would take the kidneys and liver and smear blood on the outside of the fleece, and put this on the orphaned lamb like a fitted coat, with the legs through the tube like sleeves of the fleece leggings, and so on. The female sheep would then almost always recognize the smell of her dead lamb on the coat and adopt the orphan. After a day, when the lamb's own smell was sufficiently dominant, we simply removed the fleece and the lamb would be accepted as part of her family, as if born into it. This saving action also

told me a lot about how resourceful and *canny* we need to be in caring for the world and preserving what God has blessed. The gift of life came only as one life was sacrificed and given to another. This is the essence of Jesus' sacrifice. Do you recall a scene in the movie "Schindler's List" where Oscar Schindler is talking late one evening with the commandant of the concentration camp. The commandant is talking about power, how the gun and the ability to take a life is real power. But Schindler turns that around, and says, "That's not *real* power. Anyone can pull a trigger. Anyone can take a life. Real power is the ability to *give life*, to withhold from taking a life—that's power!"

Later, while shaving, the commandant catches his reflection in the mirror, and is intrigued by Schindler's notion of benevolence. He toys with it, measures his ability to give a gift of life, rather than use the lame or inattentive as target practice for his rifle from his balcony above the camp. But soon, he's back to his malicious ways. Of course, what sets Christ apart is that he willingly gave up his life as a pattern for all humanity. And he is able to give that gift of eternal life to all who accept him.

In the tradition in which Jesus grew, the shedding of blood was the heart of the sacrifice. This is because the life was seen to be in the blood. God gives life and gives it into the blood, and only God could receive the blood. So Jews were forbidden to eat flesh unless the blood had been drained from it. When the priest offered a sacrifice for the people he would take a saucer of blood and fling it on the people as a sign that the blood of the animal had been substituted for their punishment for sin. The spotted blood upon them was a sign of their salvation.

As I became older, all the things that we did to preserve life during that lambing season seemed to be echoed in what I learned Christ had done for us. And then I learned not only that Christ was called the *Lamb of God* who died "for the sin of the world," but that he too had a seamless garment which, at his death, became the something gambled over by soldiers whom he was literally dying for.

In our reading from Ephesians 1, Paul talks about how God adopts us as his children through the blood of Jesus Christ (1:5). It is just as, through the blood of one life in nature, another life is saved. This is how, Paul says, we reclaim our inheritance, we become adopted into the family of God.

These are all just images, of course. But they are not *mere* images. It is through such pictures and experiences that we construct a picture of God. This is how Christ taught. We can't see God. Like Jesus in his parables and teachings we take familiar images from the world and let them speak for us and for God.

Frances Alexander knew how vital such images of the world are, especially the experiences and remembrances of childhood. They are far more potent than we can imagine. Why else has *All things Bright and Beautiful* endeared itself to so many generations.

Amen