O Quanta Qualia

June 2nd, 2019

Easter 7

*O quanta, qualia sunt illa sabbata*

*quae semper celebrat superna curia,*

*Quae fessis requies, quae merces fortibus,*

*cum erit omnia Deus in omnibus.*

*O what their joy and their glory must be, –*

*those endless Sabbaths the blessed ones see!*

*crown for the valiant: to weary ones rest:*

*God shall be all, and in all ever blest.*

The visionary lines of this 12th Century hymn were written by Peter Abelard. They begin with a beatific vision, a vision of joy in the Lord. They remind us of the promise of bliss that God gives to us through the Lord Jesus (Matthew 5), of the endless Sabbath that the Lord of the Sabbath offers us (Hebrews 4:9-11). Abelard had a troubled life; his autobiography is titled *Historia Calamitatum*—the story of his calamities. Abelard suffered from genius and arrogance; he suffered from bad relationships with other teachers and clerics, from a disastrous love affair that resulted in the birth of a son, a secret marriage, and then a violent attack ending in his castration. Later he became a monk, but wandered from place to place. Throughout his teaching career, he was always in trouble, always in feuds—with William of Champeaux, with Abbot Suger, with St. Bernard of Clairvaux. Though Abelard was not a saint, and not always sound in his theology, he loved learning and teaching, and eventually helped Heloise, his former lover and wife, set up the Abbey of the Paracelete, where he became abbot, and even wrote hymns to be used by the nuns. The hymn I have quoted is the only surviving song from that hymnal, written sometime around 1130. Even at the abbey, Abelard escaped several attempts on his life. At the close of his *Historia Calamitatum,* he says, “Let us then take heart from these proofs and examples, and bear our wrongs the more cheerfully the more we know they are undeserved…And since everything is managed by divine ordinance, each one of the faithful, when it comes to the test, must take comfort at least from the knowledge that God’s supreme goodness allows nothing to be done outside his plan, and whatever is started wrongly, he himself brings it to the best conclusion. Hence in all things it is right to say to him, ‘Thy will be done.’ Finally, think what consolation comes to those who love God on the authority of the Apostle, who says: ‘As we know, all things work together for good for those who love God” (*Historia Calamitatum* in *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, Tr. Betty Radice. London: Penguin, 1974, 105). After castration, years of harassment, separation from the love of his life, Abelard could still say that all things work for the best when we put our trust and faith in God. The song of Abelard sings the ultimate goodness of God in all things.

In our reading from Acts 16 today, we encounter Paul and Silas in prison—their only crime being that they healed a young girl of her demonic possession and thereby deprived her master of a source of income from her divination: “After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks. About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them” (Acts 16:23-25). All of this took place in Philippi, the city where a church was founded with the help of the first convert, a woman named Lydia. It was to this church that Paul would later write—from a different prison—those beautiful words: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you” (Philippians 4:4-9). *The Lord is near*—the Lord is always near, no matter what happens to us, no matter what we do—whether good or ill—the forgiving, loving and saving God is always near. One wonders what kind of hymns Paul and Silas sang to the other prisoners in Philippi. There are scattered fragments of hymns in the New Testament—some in Paul’s letters, some in 1 John, and some in Revelation. Last week, I read one, which may have been a musical adaptation of Isaiah 60:1-2: “Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you” (Ephesians 5:14). Likewise, to Timothy, he writes this hymn: “If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he also will deny us; if we are faithless, he remains faithful” (2 Timothy 2:11-13). The Roman governor and persecutor of Christians, Pliny the Younger, confirms that Christians sang praise to Christ as though addressing a divinity (*Epistulae* X, 96). In the opening pages of his recent book, Biblical scholar Matthew E. Gordley remarks: “‘The Christian church began with song.’ So claimed Ralph Martin, and from the witness of the New Testament, we may readily agree. The songs sung by Mary, Zechariah, Simeon, and the angelic host in Luke’s gospel and the hymns recited by the throne in Revelation mark the advent of Christ and the exaltation of Christ…as events that were generative of hymnic praise. The New Testament hymns naturally have their focus on the praise of God and the praise of Jesus” (Matthew E. Gordley, *New Testament Christological Hymns,* IVP Press, 2018).

The apostles Paul and Silas must have been singing of their Lord and Redeemer as they sat in their chains and stocks. Where there was suffering, they brought some entertainment and teaching; they brought the words of life and hope to others. Songs can strengthen us for long marches through unknown terrain. In Xenophon’s *Anabasis*, the Greek armies always sang the *paean* before setting out on a march. They fortified themselves with song. Song can be medicine to our souls. The young David played the harp and sang to assuage the depression of King Saul. Songs can help us find our way. Legend says that Blondel found the kidnapped and missing Richard the Lionehart by traveling from tower to tower and singing, waiting for his king to respond, which he eventually did. Songs can also be the best proclamation of blessing and grace in the midst of horror. Commenting on the 21 Coptic Martyrs and related incidents—some of the victims were singing and praying as they were murdered—Father Raymond J. Souza says: “The purpose of the liturgy is not only to listen to God and speak to Him, but more than that. The liturgy of heaven—the saints gathered around the crucified and risen Jesus — somehow breaks into this world. At the earthly liturgy we are already beholding what shall be.” (Father Raymond J. Souza, “Father Raymond J. de Souza: Egypt’s Coptic Orthodox are proud to be slain by ISIL for their Christianity. That is awesome” *National Post,* April 11th, 2017). Song is eternal communion in love. Indeed, that is the whole foundation of the Benedictine practice of singing the Psalms throughout the day—to mirror the saints and angels in heaven. Song is not just wishful thinking in times of stress. To sing is to strengthen, heal, seek, bless and fortify ourselves and others. It is to participate in the life of God and to experience God. Paul and Silas fortified themselves with praise and they edified their audience with praise. They shared their freedom with the others in chains.

Our lives were designed to praise God and to be lived as praises to God—this is why there has always been religion and always will be. It is universal because it is hardwired into us—we are built to praise and adore the source of our life. The apostles sang that night at Philippi, and God answered with a liberating earthquake: “And suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone's bonds were unfastened. When the jailer woke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul cried with a loud voice, ‘Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.’ And the jailer called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them out and said, ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’ And they said, ‘Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.’ And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family. Then he brought them up into his house and set food before them. And he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God” (Acts 16:26-34). *And he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God.* Believing in God is rejoicing in the good news. And the song of belief that Paul and Silas had shared led the jailer to that joyful belief.

What is our song today? What song do you bring to your times of distress, times of obstacles, times of frustration, times of persecution, times of sympathizing with others in distress? Sometimes the kingdom of heaven will look like a prison cell. Sometimes it looks like an office. Sometimes it is a great and crowded train station. Sometimes it is a wayside bus stop in the middle of nowhere. The kingdom of God is wherever you are, whatever field God has planted you in—that is where you experience that the Lord is near, where you experience and taste the risen life and where you share the divine life. The only real desert or prison is where the Holy Spirit is absent or unwanted, where there is no song to sing. It has been said that pastors only really have one sermon that they preach. And there are a number of musicians that seem to work the same song over and over again. And it raises a good question—if I can only sing one song, what song will it be? There may be times when you are the only hope in a place that is hungry and thirsty for hope—but hope has come because you carry the song of Christ in your heart and in the way you live your life with Jesus.

*O Quanta Qualia*

By Peter Abelard

O what their joy and their glory must be, –

those endless Sabbaths the blessed ones see!

crown for the valiant: to weary ones rest:

God shall be all, and in all ever blest.

What are the Monarch, His court, and His throne?

What are the peace and the joy that they own?

Tell us, ye blest ones, that in it have share,

if what ye feel ye can fully declare.

Truly ‘Jerusalem’ name we that shore,

‘Vision of Peace’ that brings joy evermore!

Wish and fulfilment can sever’d be ne’er,

nor the thing pray’d for come short of the pray’r.

We, where no trouble distraction can bring,

safely the anthems of Sion shall sing:

while for Thy grace, Lord, their voices of praise

thy blessed people shall evermore raise.

There dawns no Sabbath, – no Sabbath is o’er;

those Sabbath-keepers have one, and no more;

one and unending is that triumph-song

which to the Angels and us shall belong.

Now in the meanwhile, with hearts raised on high,

we for that country must yearn and must sigh:

seeking Jerusalem, dear native land,

through our long exile on Babylon’s strand.

Low before Him with our praises we fall,

of Whom, and in Whom, and through Whom are all:

of Whom, – the Father; and in whom, – the Son;

through Whom, – the Spirit, with These ever One.

Amen.