

THOUGHTS FROM THE RHINELAND

PAIN, PROVIDENCE, AND HAPPY ENDINGS

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AN UNEXPECTED REFLECTION

Long ago in Middle Earth, in a dark crevice high in the mountains, sat two hobbits. They were there taking a rest upon their most unusual of journeys. What is unusual about this is not simply the fact that a hobbit would be found on a journey, for that would occasionally happen. What was unusual was rather the place where their journey had taken them, and brought them to their momentary rest: the Mountains of Shadow, on the doorstep of Mordor. They had arrived at their frightful locale with the assistance of a rather wretched creature, named Sméagol. Precisely how they got there and what happened to them after this respite is a tale for another time. It is enough to know that it was a miracle they made it there at all.

Now, you may ask, what were they doing in a high pass on the edge of Mordor? Well, a rather curious set of circumstances landed one of the hobbits, Frodo Baggins, with the most dangerous artifact in the world. This artifact, the Ring of Power, had to be destroyed. Now the task of destroying it was all but impossible, since it required sneaking into the heart of enemy territory to destroy it in the same place where it was made. This task, which would

be practically impossible for the most seasoned of warriors, was entrusted to a hobbit, who was rather more used to a comfortable hole in a hill than a crevice in the heights. Yet there they were, on a seemingly impossible journey, with little food, almost no water, and only a wisp of hope.

Why did the wise of Middle Earth entrust such an important task to them? And why did they accept it? It seems that our little friends were whisked away by the streams of providence, whose roads have no maps accessible to mortals. Frodo's uncle, Bilbo Baggins, warned him of such things: "It's a dangerous business, Frodo, going out of your door," he used to say. "You step into the Road, and if you don't keep your feet, there is no knowing where you might be swept off to." Indeed.

Yet at this moment of rest something striking happened. Frodo's humble servant and friend, Samwise Gamgee, piped up with a deep reflection on old stories, since he saw that his adventure had some similarities to theirs. It is upon Sam's commentary that I would like to reflect for a moment, because it outlines, in a peculiarly vivid way, the workings of providence. And maybe, if we can see the hope that guides and drives Frodo and Sam to the completion of their task, we ourselves might find a reason to hope in the strange and sometimes horrid circumstances that come our way as well.

CHOICES AND CONSEQUENCES

In the crevice, we find Frodo lamenting about the horror of his current circumstances. He ends his comments with despondent resignation: "But so our path is laid." "Yes it is so," responds Sam. "And we shouldn't be here at all, if we'd known more about it before we started." This knowledge, however, would have been impossible to obtain. They were, in fact, warned before taking on the burden of the Ring that it was a nearly impossible task, and would include great trial. But the nature of warnings is that they can only hint at

the terror of danger, for one must experience danger and suffering before one can fully appreciate it. This is the difficulty with decisions. Like choosing a path in the woods, we can only see so far ahead, and must accept the consequences of what we cannot see. However, even when we can see the bad effects of our decisions before we make them, we hardly ever understand the bad effects until we are in the midst of them. To face this unknown requires fortitude.

This can, of course, leave one in a bit of a bind. What if my choices have truly terrible consequences? Even if I can foresee them, they remain painful, and even if I am doing the “right” thing, it’s still a bitter pill. If these consequences are a result of my own sins, they become even harder to bear. Sometimes, too, we are led to make decisions that lead to awful circumstances because they seem to be the only things to do. This was certainly the case with Frodo, who felt that only he could take the Ring to Mount Doom. And so our hobbits found themselves in a lonely crevice atop the Mountains of Shadow. If ever there were a time to want to turn around, it was at that moment. But Frodo and Sam were determined to go on, though they had little hope of success.

Likewise, we too can find it necessary simply to accept the consequences of our own actions or the actions of others, even if they are painful. When all is said and done, though, would we change what happened? Surely, Sam says, that if they had known what the journey entailed, they never would have set out. But did he actually want to change it? Would he have refused the burden? I don’t think so. As Frodo said, his path was laid before him. He simply followed it into the darkness. There is something predetermined here, as if all his actions, no matter what they are, somehow fit into some mysterious plan, a plan that guides them on their journey.

By this point in the story, Frodo had narrowly escaped death many times before he came to this momentary rest, and he will miss death by a hair’s breath in the coming pages. Yet with all that, he continued on. Maybe, it was the understanding of this

mysterious hand that guided him through his trials that allowed Frodo to keep going. Maybe when he says, “But so our path is laid,” he is not as despondent as we might think at first glance. For he could have turned back, and yet he and Sam continued on. Sometimes the results of our decisions or the pain inflicted upon us by others must be born. Yet if we understand that it is part of a great plan, a great story, then it can be meaningful in the end. This is where the knowledge of Divine Providence helps.

DIVINE PROVIDENCE ORDERS ALL THINGS WELL

Sam continues on with his reflection, talking about the difference between the average adventure story and the truly great ones. He says, “But that’s not the way of it with the tales that really mattered, or the ones that stay in the mind. Folk seem to have been just landed in them, usually – their paths were laid that way, as you put it.” Many parts of our lives are outside our control, and are determined by circumstances. In the case of our hobbit heroes, they never would have set out on this journey had not Frodo’s uncle, Bilbo, found the Ring when he was dropped down a forgotten passage by accident and found his way to a forgotten cave at the roots of a mountain. A strange happenstance, yet one that shows the delicate hand of Providence at work.

The strange thing about a story, as well as real life, is that things seem to work out for the good in the end. Despite the dire predictions of the dystopic authors of the twentieth century, somehow the world is still here. Maybe individual stories have bad ends, but the overall story of humanity has a lot of good in it, and still has a lot of hope. We can lay this success at the feet of Providence, that great storyboard that guides creation in the mind of God. And in the end, we know that all things will be done for the good of creation, since divine Wisdom, “reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other, and she orders all things well” (Wis 8:1).



THOMAS MORAN - CHILDE ROLAND TO THE DARK TOWER CAME

Why, then, does so much go wrong if God's Providence is at work? That is largely a mystery. We do, though, have a partial answer, one that can help us trust that all is being done according to the plan of God. When talking about divine things, it is often best to talk about what we know on the human level first. Thus, before talking about Divine Providence, it is first helpful to discuss briefly what human providence is.

Human providence is simply a plan, a scheme of sorts, held in the mind of the planner, a mental blue print or a storyboard. These plans can be for a building, a story, a trip, or even for life. In general we want our plans to be perfect, but at the same time we plan for error. Mistakes and unexpected circumstances do come our way after all and we want our plan to be ready to meet it. Yet our planning cannot foresee all circumstances, nor is the future in our control. Gandalf remarks that even the wise, who can see many things, cannot see all that is to come.

The fact that things generally do end up for the best leads us to see that there is a greater plan at work, one that is comprehensive of all creation. This is an aspect of St. Thomas Aquinas's fifth way for proving the existence of God. If non-intelligent creations, like rocks and plants, have reasons for their movement, then some intelligent being must move them. Since all creation does exhibit natural motion towards ends, this can prove the existence of God. The thing about human providence is that we can only plan for particular events and circumstances. God's plan, on the other hand, encompasses all creation. Nothing falls outside God's Providence.

The curious thing about Divine Providence is that because it is universal, it can allow for some defect. Aquinas states, "A particular provider excludes all defect from what is subject to his care as far as he can; whereas, one who provides universally allows some little defect to remain, lest the good of the whole should be hindered" (*STh* I, q. 22, a. 2 ad 2). Divine Providence acts for the good of the whole, the good of the whole story so to speak. Sam goes on to reflect upon the characters in the stories that really matter: "But I expect they had lots of chances, like us, of turning back, only they didn't... We hear about those as just went on - and not all to a good end, mind you; at least not to what folk inside a story and not outside it call a good end."

Yes, not all individual stories seem to have what we could call a happy ending, where everyone goes home and things are changed only a little. But note Sam's mysterious qualification: It only seems like a bad end to those *in the story*. Somehow those outside the story know better, because they can glimpse the whole.

For sure, the martyrs of the early Church would have been seen by their pagan contemporaries to have had bad ends, yet those of us who hear and retell their part in the great story of creation know better. We see that their earthly end was in fact no end at all, but a beginning. They have simply passed outside the bounds of our current narrative, though they exist elsewhere and still

affect us now. It is important to remember that though individual tragedy strikes, yet God can bring good out of it. “We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose” (Rom 8:28).

In the end, God allows particular evils to happen so that he can bring a greater good out of them. The martyrs are allowed to suffer, so that they can be brought to greater sanctity. Frodo must endure much, and in fact was never healed while he remained in Middle Earth. Yet, he was given the reward of the elves, and beyond the seas he found healing and rest. God allows us to be tried so that greater good will come out of it, but he never tries us beyond our strength. We further see that he can even take our own sinfulness and bring good from it.

Take, for example Boromir’s sin at the end of the Fellowship of the Ring. He tried to take the Ring for himself, and in the end broke the fellowship established at Rivendell. Truly it was a great evil, and caused much pain. Yet, had he not done it, Frodo might never have had the resolve to go on to Mordor rather than to Gondor. Boromir’s sin made the decision clear. Though a great evil occurred, yet it was part of a series of events that led to final victory. For now the rest of the fellowship could go on to distract the enemy, while Frodo and Sam snuck into Mordor.

We too celebrate such victories of Providence. For at the Easter Vigil we hear in the Exsultet, “O happy fault that earned so great, so glorious a Redeemer!” Though terrible, Original Sin allowed for a great good to be given to humanity—the greatest of goods, in fact.

Despite our failings, God desired to save us, and so became man that we might be united to him. Though all the pain, the suffering, and the misery of the world is due to original sin, yet because of it God has given us something greater: the promise of life with him. And if we are blessed to receive this gift, all the misery and pain we endured here will not simply be wiped away, but will be accounted to us as glory, for by these sufferings God shaped us for himself. As Jesus entered heaven with the battle scars of the cross as symbols

of victory, we will see our own scars in the same light. Our trials will no longer be a burden to us there, but a symbol of sanctity.

HOPE IN THE MIDST OF HOPELESSNESS

While we know that Providence is guiding all of history, including our individual history, we can still be confused and hurt by what feels like an unfair lot, and there are plenty of unfair lots. God's ways are mysterious, and it is hard, very hard, to understand why we must endure such pain at times. We cannot always understand the workings of Providence, but we know that it is working. This knowledge can give us hope, and this hope will help us to endure.

Hope is one of those special graces, given to us by God, that we call the theological virtues. Hope is the virtue that promises us a better life. It is theological because it is not based on human wisdom or strength. Theological hope realizes that only God can bring us to eternal rest. This defends us both from total despair before the tyranny of the world and from the presumption that everything is ok when it is not. It is a realistic view of the world: yes things are not as they should be, but that will be fixed one day by one who is greater than I.

This hope in the healing of eternity with God can give us strength to endure all trials. In his story, Fr. Walter Cizek, S.J., survived by means of this hope. He bore some of the worst that Soviet Russia's hard labor camps had to offer, and yet found strength in this terrible trial in the hope of a healing eternity. In his time in prison, he was often alone, starving, or unsure he had the strength to live even to the next minute, much like our hobbit heroes. But during this time he found solace in the guidance of God, who traveled with him. Fr. Cizek says, "Religion, prayer, and love of God do not change reality, but they give it a new meaning."

God does not necessarily remove the present pain from those he loves. But he does give us strength to endure, he does accompany

us through the pain. In Fr. Ciszek's case, God gave meaning to his suffering. And this meaning helped him to endure, and even helped to sanctify him. Suffering is not and cannot be meaningless, even if we cannot understand the meaning of it right now.

God himself became man so that he could suffer for and with us: "For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Heb 4:15). This suffering had a purpose, and when we are joined with Christ, our suffering too is given a meaning and is made a means of our own sanctification. For then we become united to the cruciform Christ.

Hope allows us to go on despite the pain, and from this hope comes heroism. Sam says, "But I expect they had lots of chances, like us, of turning back, only they didn't." He then remarks on a story from his own world, a legend of another hopeless cause that somehow succeeded. "Beren now, he never thought he was going to get the Silmaril from the Iron Crown in Thangorodrim, and yet he did, and that was a worse place and a blacker danger than ours."

The hope that Beren had drove him on to succeed where no one else could. Likewise with Fr. Ciszek, who with the help of God endured the labor camps of Siberia and brought Christ to those who were in darkness. We may read his story and see only pain, but I am sure from the other side of eternity Fr. Ciszek is looking back and sees only victory, the victory of Christ.

In the end, hope hopes for a happy ending. But the ending has yet to be fulfilled, and we know that it is coming. For now, though, we are simply a part of the larger story of creation that marches on toward salvation behind the cross of Christ. Sam himself realizes this in a powerful moment in his monologue. "And why, sir, I never thought of that before! We've got—you've got some of the light of it in that star-glass that the Lady gave you!" At this moment, Sam realizes the stories he heard as a child were real, and that in fact he is part of that same story. The story of Beren and the Silmaril lives on, for Frodo has in his hand a relic from that same tale.

We ourselves have a real connection to the heroes of our own world, the saints. We tell their stories, but they become real when we touch their relics and visit their homes. They are not mere fictions, but real people who were part of making the world what it is today.

An even greater event happens in the Blessed Sacrament. For there we come face to face with Jesus. We receive his body, that same body which died on the cross and now rests in splendor in heaven. With Sam we can exclaim, “You’ve got some of the light!”—that is, the light of the world, God made man. When Christ comes to us, he comes in the flesh, really truly. And with the light of faith we can see this clearly.

The curious thing about the tales that matter is that they never end. They in fact are real stories, stories that come from real people and that truly effect us. They do not end because the world has not ended. And so the story goes on. “No, they never end as tales,” said Frodo. “But the people in them come, and go when their part’s ended.” Where do they, the blessed, go? Surely, into the presence of God, awaiting resurrection. There all their tears, all our tears, will be wiped away.

All things in this life are directed toward the good of eternal life. For those who are called, there will be only joy, not sadness. This knowledge does not make our suffering here any less real, but it does help us to put it into context. Here, agony is for but a time; there, peace is unending. This age is but a doorstep to eternity, a drop in the ocean of everlasting life. Time may not heal all things, but eternity will, for it is not simply an elongation of existence, but a perfection of it. And this is what gives us hope—that despite our weakness, we will be healed and made perfect.

HOPE IN THE ENDING

When we are faced with dreadful choices, we can hope in Divine Providence. All things will end for the good, despite

what we see now. Though we may have to suffer for a little while, our hope can help get us through. Knowledge of eternity can help us to pray even in the midst of pain. It helped Sam and Frodo, it helped Fr. Cizsek, and it can help us. In the end, God will surprise us. We will look back and see that somehow we made it through those trials because he was there, guiding us gently along the way.

Despite our own fumbings, our own sinfulness, God will make all end for the good, for he is in control. With this knowledge God will help us get up from the crags we rest in and move on, proceeding along the path he has laid out before us. For if we trust him, it will end in a happy Jerusalem.

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