

The following two articles were presented at St Peter's College, Auckland, on the occasion of the annual "Sam Hunt Scholarship" evening which honours the winners of a student literary competition in poetry and prose.

To see the face of God: Wisdom in the Judeo-Christian tradition Daniel J Stollenwerk



Job, the greatest of the wisdom books in Sacred Scripture, perhaps best exemplifies the Judeo-Christian tradition of the pursuit of wisdom which finds its fulfillment in God. The protagonist of this 6th Century BC work asked why, why must he, an innocent man, suffer? No argument satisfied him. Exasperated with his so-called friends' explanations, he demanded, and attained, an interview with God. One gets the feeling that God's response – hardly an explanation for innocent suffering—is not the point of the story. Rather, what was crucial was that Job had had a one on one, a tête-à-tête, an experience of God himself. **In the end, though he had not received a reasonable explanation for innocent suffering, he had contemplated the very face of God and that was now sufficient.**

The story goes that the greatest of all medieval theologians, Thomas Aquinas, near the end of his life had a vision of God as well. The vision was so beautiful, the 13th century Dominican related, that, in comparison, all his theological treatises were but straw. After the vision, he put down his pen and wrote no more. Thomas had moved from faith seeking understanding to contemplation of God, for the former no longer sufficed.

Dante, the great 14th century Italian poet, writes of awakening in a dark woods of sin and hopelessness. He had lost the true path and the beasts of malice, incontinence, and ambition blocked him from the True Way. The Roman poet Virgil, however, the symbol of reason, appears to lead Dante on a journey back to God. Virgil will accompany the great medieval poet through hell and purgatory. But reason, though necessary to avoid sin, is not sufficient to lead Dante to the greatest of all wisdom, an understanding of God, an experience of God, the beatific vision itself. Beatrice, representing both human and divine love, will accompany Dante into

heaven. Even she, however, cannot bring him to the closest proximity to, the clearest vision of God. Bernardo, the great medieval monk and mystic, renowned for his pure desire for contemplation, will accompany Dante to the nearest circle of God where the redeemed are gathered in the shape of a rose.

The Italian Renaissance philosopher Giovanni Pico della Mirandola perhaps sums up this Judeo-Christian pursuit of wisdom best: Human nature is open, he declares; we can choose. If we let our passions and instincts rule our lives, we are but animals. If reason dominates, however, if we control our passions with our mind, if we seek understanding through reason, then we soar to the heights of what it is to be human. But even reason is not enough. If we truly seek wisdom, then we will dedicate ourselves to contemplation; through meditative prayer we reach out to God himself.

In this article Dr Stollenwerk speaks of Dante, Job, and the parish widow, among others, who have walked the four steps of instinct, reason, love, and contemplation in their pursuit of the source of all wisdom, God himself.

Instinct, reason, love, contemplation: four stages of growth in human development, four steps toward wisdom in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

So many of the facts concerning adolescent life in New Zealand that we read about in the NZ Herald fall into the first category: the sexual practices of NZ teenagers, the number of abortions performed each year, the percentage of youth that smoke marijuana, etc., etc., etc. In other words, surveys and statistics often speak of human behavior; they tell us what is.

But are such practices what they ought to be? Are they ethical, moral, correct? This is a question for reason. Dante and Thomas especially were adamant that humans were capable of living ethically through the use of reason alone. When the Church today discusses abortion with people of different religions and political structures, for example, she

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bases all arguments on Natural Law and reason, not faith and biblical revelation. And so she must. **Reason is the unifying measure in the symphony (often cacophony) of human diversity.** By reason we can live moral lives. Even adolescent boys can use reason to control their passions –instead of allowing their passions to control them, their lives, their futures.

Besides allowing humanity to control instinct and thus to transcend our animal nature, reason also allows us to explore the intricacies and wonders of the universe, to record and direct history, to create and appreciate the symbolic nature of ritual and art. **Human reason takes us beyond instinct to intelligence, beyond desire to a higher form of living.**

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But full human development does not stop with study, even the study of pure mathematics or physics, philosophy or theology. Much less can it be said that one has attained the apex of human potential simply by being a good boy. **Reason takes us just so far in the pursuit of a full life.** Sooner or later, one must write that book, plant that tree, rear that child. **Human love desires to create, to reach beyond itself (and then allow that creation complete independence).**

But true wisdom, besides transcending reason, must also move beyond love. **True wisdom is the ultimate “waste of time”.** It is sitting, meditating, contemplating, taking out time to be alone, to reflect, to pray. Of course all stages of growth should be present at all times in life, but meditation and prayer are most often associated with the wisdom of the elderly. Parish priests know the importance of the widow who abstains from all Church politics but attends Mass regularly. She is the soul of the parish, the faith that enlivens the body.

One thinks of the New Testament figure of Anna of the tribe of Asher who at 84 never left the temple, but worshiped night and day with fasting and prayer (Lk 2,36-38). She was able to lay her eyes on the Messiah himself. Or of the devout and righteous Simeon who also awaited the consolation of Israel (Lk 2, 25-35). He came in the spirit of the Lord to the temple, took the infant Jesus in his arms, and declared that now the Lord could let his servant go in peace, for he had seen the salvation of Israel.

Not all the elderly are wise of course. Many are bitter. Life has been unjust, their families don't visit them, they've been mistreated. And they will tell you so for hours at a time. Others, however, are wise. Most people can point to one or another wise person. I have in mind an elderly widow whose son committed suicide some 25 years ago. More recently, she herself was successfully treated for

breast cancer but must take medication for the rest of her days. Her other children are out of the home; they're married, had children. She sees them as often as their busy lives allow. An ex-teacher she still takes people into her home to help them with private tuition. Her story is not that uncommon. More to the point though, she takes time out each day to pray the rosary and go to mass. It's her quiet time, her time to meditate. **It is a time to filter all her memories through the organizational, purifying nature of prayer.**

I have another widow in mind as well. She too has lived through the pains of child-rearing including some fairly vile abuse in the family. Most of her children have come right. The same cannot be said of her grandchildren. Still she is there for both generations as a stable, good - even virtuous - person. Faith has been a big factor in this woman's life. And now one can observe that that faith has taken the form of meditation. Daily Mass is part of the routine, as is silent meditation before the Blessed Sacrament on a weekly basis. No talk, mind you. 80 years is enough time to listen to a sermon. No music. No books. Just silence. **Meditation has become the structure upon which she now builds her day, the prism through which she sees her life, the vehicle by which she seeks her heart's desire.**

It may be objected that Church-going widows are not the only manifestation of wisdom in our society, and, of course, I would not disagree. But there is something about the widow in the parish that should not be ignored. She is, at the very least, a symbol of wisdom in the contemporary world. She has had experience – and grasped the meaning - of a full life. She prays. She has time to “waste” in contemplation of the divine; for what else is life for? Like Job (and Qoheleth), she has finally found peace with the absurdities and injustices of life.

Instinct, reason, love, contemplation: The Judeo-Christian tradition maps out these four stages in one's quest for wisdom. Full human development will not ignore any of the four. By means of reason, youth can conquer the instincts of hormones and stay out of trouble; they can aspire to great knowledge and understanding. **Love, however requires that they reach beyond themselves to create, inspire, direct the next generation.** Contemplation, finally, seeks the source of all wisdom, that for which we yearn with all our being, that with which we long to be united: God himself.