

Where is Everyone? *Apokatastasis*, Divine Charity, and Human Freedom¹

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In the 2016 remake of the classic western *The Magnificent Seven*, a motley crew led by Sam Chisholm (played by Denzel Washington) is called upon to rid a town of a bullying tyrant. In an exchange with one of the principal townswomen, Emma Cullen, who has lost almost everything to this villain, Sam asks about her motivation: “So you seek revenge?” Emma answers him, “I seek righteousness, as should we all. But I’ll take revenge.” It is, if I may say, an immensely satisfying line that captures an innocent woman’s refusal to surrender her ideals even as her oppressor’s impunity galvanizes her to yearn at least for his downfall, if not his ultimate redemption.

How often do the rest of us look at some egregious example of shameless devilry, of monstrous inhumanity, and wish, if not for its redemption, at least for vengeance? Most of us can think of people who, with little pain to our own conscience, we could imagine suffering eternal torments. At first glance, it seems one would have to be exceptionally charitable to muster any sincere regret at the prospect of eternal damnation for the architects of the Holocaust, the Gulag, the Holodomor, or the Killing Fields; for tormentors of children, or for that vile fiend who designed an electrified chair to terrify the young Indigenous inmates of a Canadian residential school. It

¹ The title of this talk (originally given on March 3, 2020 as part of the series “Tuesdays at MASI”), as readers who enjoy classic films and television will have discerned, is taken from the pilot episode of Rod Serling’s masterful series *The Twilight Zone* – an episode that illustrates powerfully the hell of solipsistic alienation.

is all very well to seek righteousness; but there are times when all of us would take revenge. To read Dante is to become uncomfortably aware of a man – perhaps not very different from ourselves – who, for all his talents, saw in the literary portrayal of the last things an opportunity to settle a few scores.

And yet, one of the pithiest and most concise affirmations of Christian soteriology is that line from the twenty first chapter of the Apocalypse: “Behold, I make all things new.” However weary and calloused one’s outlook might be, nevertheless the sovereignty of Christ – who tramples on death by death, defeats the enemy, and lavishes life on those in the tombs – seems mocked if the human tendency to settle for revenge, however understandable from our perspective, creeps into the Lordship of Christ over the transformed cosmos.

Prescinding for a moment from the very worst examples of human obliquity such as those just catalogued, it seems that settling for revenge rather than righteousness is even more plainly inconsistent with the Christian notion of Christ’s Lordship if we think, not of Pol Pot or Lavrentiy Beria, but of the teeming masses who are just muddling through – such as Great-Uncle Ned, a thoroughly decent chap who was nonetheless never terribly punctilious about attending Sunday Mass; our kind and just and generous neighbours who have not in any obvious way received the grace of faith; or the immense multitude of little ones who pass away without seeing the light of day, let alone the waters of baptism. The Lord makes all things new, and His mercy endures forever, but there are in our churches some solid traditions of consigning any number of such hapless souls to perdition without, it must be said, much dismay.

This ought to trouble us. It ought to trouble us even in those utterly depraved cases I just mentioned. Let us take as a specific example that loathsome individual who set out to inflict fear and pain on the little children from Indigenous communities sentenced to miserable years in a residential school. Even here, it seems to me, there is a world of difference between retribution with a fiery core of justice, and revenge with a rotten core of cruelty. An understandable justice might say “I would like to see that monster suffer as long and as

deeply as he must until he himself has felt all the pain he inflicted, until he truly and from the depths of his being begs forgiveness from God and from his survivors.” On the other hand, to say, “I just want him to suffer and to go on suffering in anguish and despair for the rest of eternity with no hope of deliverance” – that is a revenge in which any spark of justice seems to have been extinguished.

The remarks that follow will not be about a single verse from scripture, although First Timothy there is a most apposite sentence that says concisely what so much of the Christian faith conspires to affirm: “God our saviour ... wishes all people to be saved.” (1 Tim 2:3–4) It is not that this or any other isolated verse proves anything definitively, but this phrase expresses in a few words what is expressed throughout the scriptures, Hebrew and Greek, the mystical traditions of the Church, and the lives of its most beloved saints, including Francis of Assisi, Thérèse of Lisieux, Seraphim of Sarov, and any number of others: the divine act of creation and the divine act of redemption both arise from Divine charity and compassion and must be defined in terms of charity and compassion all the way down the line, or they make no sense at all.

“God our Saviour wishes all people to be saved.” This sentiment gives rise to entire departments of theology as the project of “faith, seeking understanding” parses these verses and others like it. What does it mean to be saved? Once we grant that God wishes something, how is it that we do not immediately move from the subjunctive to the indicative mood – for does not God’s wishing something make it so? And if not, why not? “God our Saviour wishes all people to be saved” – the observation should delight but not really surprise us, once we have accepted that Christ’s life and teaching were good news.

Consider, for example, the passage from Isaiah 61:1–2 that Jesus reads in the synagogue in Nazareth: “He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed.” (Luke 4:18) Make this mission selective rather than universal, and you immediately nullify its claim to be good news. We can confidently take this