

Daniel's Reflection for Week Beginning 17th April - Now and for ever more

My mother warned me, even as a boy, about the later memories that would bless and burn within me. She spoke wistfully about the ways we mourn our unfulfilled dreams. How achingly right she was. Dylan Thomas in his Poem in October was no stranger to such grief:

*And I saw in the turning so clearly a child's
Forgotten mornings when he walked with his mother
Through the parables
Of sun light
And the legends of the green chapels
And the twice told fields of infancy
That his tears burned my cheeks and his heart moved in mine.*

It is difficult to write dispassionately about childhood. It is too sacred, too much intimately a part of us. For many of us, there is a haunting kind of poignancy running through our memories, a touching pathos, the struggle to express something inexpressible and very beautiful. There is also a constant desire to return to that primal state as though everything afterwards was somehow a disappointment.

Poets strive to capture those memories of childhood that carry shades of the numinous, of a familiarity with the divine, and then, of a gradual loss, in time, of that graced intimation. William Wordsworth believed that we are born 'trailing clouds of glory' and that 'heaven lies about us in our infancy'. Thomas Traherne remembered being 'entertained like an angel' when 'all time was eternity' and 'knowledge was divine'. For Dylan Thomas, his childhood companions in 'Fern Hill' were 'Adam and maiden'. 'So it must have been', he reflected, 'after the birth of the simple light in the first, spinning place.' In his poem 'The Retreat', Henry Vaughan's hope is that 'when this dust falls to the urn, in that state I came, return'.

In one of his moving reflections, theologian Karl Rahner offers a more hopeful point of view. He holds that our childhood is not the elusive mirage of an unattainable heaven, a moment to be lived through and lost forever. It is, rather, each human being's potential for beatitude, in this life and the next. Paradoxical as it may seem, we grow into the fullness of the childhood we once lived through. For him, the gifts and graces of our early years are the clearest and closest expression of God's incarnate nature – and of our unaware and partial participation in it. He reflects on the child's unknowing familiarity with the mystery that is denied to 'the wise and clever'. Is this not why Jesus summed up his teaching about the kingdom of heaven in the vibrant symbol of a child?

Rahner takes us an astonishing step further. He is convinced that this childhood is what we fully recover, completely possess, and ultimately freely celebrate in the playgrounds of heaven.

'We do not move away from childhood in any real sense,' he writes. 'We move towards the eternity of this childhood, to its definitive and enduring validity in God's sight – a field which bears fair flowers and ripe fruits such as can grow in this field of childhood, and no other, and which will be carried into the storehouses of eternity.'

Some people grow like a tree grows. A tree never loses the integral, authentic shape of itself. Like the child, the tree does not want to be anybody or anything else. It only wants to become more fully what it already is.

It is in this 'being true to themselves' that people most resemble and worship God. In his poem 'The Bright Field' R.S. Thomas reflects this vision:

*... It is the turning
aside like Moses to the miracle
of the lit bush, to a brightness
that seemed as transitory as your youth
once, but is the eternity that awaits you.*

There are many unique qualities in our childhood state and memories, but the grace of openness flows through them all. It is openness that allows wonder to steal in, and our dreams to steal out. It is in our openness, according to St Thomas Aquinas, that we most resemble God. It is a vulnerable openness, this readiness to apprehend the invisible world, this recollection of an elusive heaven almost within our grasp. Such sacramental moments of openness have an eternal edge of expectancy to them, a reaching beyond our capacities, a yearning for gifts from beyond.

(Unmasking God pp79,80)