

“SHE HAS DONE A BEAUTIFUL THING TO ME”: LEARNING IN TIMES OF AUSTERITY

*A keynote address delivered on the occasion of the first annual
Templeton Honors College Matriculation – September 6, 2013
Wayne Presbyterian Church, Wayne, PA*

RJ Snell
Professor of Philosophy

It was now two days before the Passover and the feast of Unleavened Bread. And the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to arrest him by stealth, and kill him; for they said, “Not during the feast, lest there be a tumult of the people.”

And while he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at table, a woman came with an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard, very costly, and she broke the flask and poured it over his head. But there were some who said to themselves indignantly, “Why was the ointment thus wasted? For this ointment might have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and given to the poor.” And they reproached her. But Jesus said, “Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you will, you can do good to them; but you will not always have me. She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for burying. And truly, I say to you, wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her.”

Mark 14: 1-6

AT 4:45AM ON 1 SEPTEMBER 1939, 1.5 million German troops invaded Poland. Just two days later, September 3, France and Britain, as well as the Dominions of the Commonwealth, declared war on Germany, despite abandoning the Poles to an awful fate, symbolized by the interruption of the last defiant song played on free Polish radio, Chopin's Nocturne in C Sharp minor. Six years later, perhaps 75 million persons had died, including up to 40 million non-combatants, horrific war crimes had occurred, many seared into our cultural memory, and weapons with the capacity to render humanity extinct had been deployed, and remain so today.

That fall found the British in despair. The exhaustion and decimation of the first world war was still an open wound, perhaps explaining the misguided policy of appeasement, the isolation of Churchill, and pro-Nazi and anti-Semitic ugliness. The economy was in shambles, the once-proud Navy rotting in dry dock, the Royal Air Force insignificant, and men in arms outnumbered and ill-equipped. It was a crisis.

That same autumn, C. S. Lewis took to the pulpit at the University Church of St. Mary the Virgin, Oxford, to give the sermon “Learning in War-Time.” “A university is a society for the pursuit of learning,” he begins, and students will be expected to make themselves into what the “Middle Ages called clerks: into philosophers, scientists, scholars, critics, or historians.” Then, in something of an understatement given the horrors about to be unleashed in Europe, Lewis remarks, “... this seems to be an odd thing to do during a great war. What is the use of beginning a task which we have so little chance of finishing ... why should we—indeed how can we—continue to take an interest in these placid occupations when the lives of our friends and the liberties of Europe are in the balance? Is it not like fiddling while Rome burns?”

Wars will be with us until the end of time, and Lewis suggests the challenge to study during crisis is not merely fiddling while Rome burns; “to a Christian,” he says, given the eternal consequences of our lives and the Truth of the Gospel, isn't studying for our clerkship more like fiddling “on the brink of hell”? Says Lewis: “every Christian who comes to a university must at all times face a question compared with which the questions raised by the war are relatively unimportant. He must ask himself how it is right, or even psychologically possible, for creatures who are every moment advancing either to Heaven or to hell to spend any fraction of the little time allowed them ... on such ... trivialities as literature or art, mathematics or biology.” Studying while Poland collapses is one thing; studying while your neighbor has not yet heard the Gospel, quite another.

There is always some crisis or emergency facing us—and always the ultimate alarm of eternity—as Lewis notes, “plausible reasons have never been lacking for putting off all merely cultural activities until some imminent danger has been averted or some crying injustice put right.” But, he continues, “humanity long ago chose to neglect those plausible reasons,” for unlike insects we did not seek first the “material welfare and security of the hive.” Humans are different, he says: “They propound mathematical theorems in beleaguered cities, conduct metaphysical arguments in condemned cells, make jokes on scaffolds,”

for we would not wait to have truth or beauty until every crisis is averted—we want truth and beauty *now*.

Yet we are fallen. Wounded by original sin, our desire for truth and beauty *now* is not proof that we are justified in choosing them while Rome burns, and we come always face to face with a stark question: “How can you be so frivolous and selfish as to think about anything but the salvation of human souls?”

One defense, if you wish to call it that, is pragmatic, and we see this argument frequently trotted out in our own time of financial austerity. No doubt education is useful. Learning to read and write, research, and invent, is beneficial. A college degree will, statistically, increase your lifetime earnings and augment your children’s futures. Universities assist in medicine, technology, public policy, employment, community development, and the list goes on. And these are no mean accomplishments, especially during times of scarcity. For Christians, education could be defended along similarly instrumental lines, as useful to missionary work, Bible translation, theological understanding, pastoral training, medical missions, culture wars, ministries, non-profits, and economic development—as useful for saving souls and bodies.

Undoubtedly this is so, and for this we can be glad. Yes. And yet, I would not explain the Honors College in these terms. Most people find meaningful work without mastering Dante or Bronte, bankers can be just without reading Plato, lawyers honest without Aquinas, parents kind without Mahler, social workers decent without Aristotle; in the same way, most disciples are not lettered, and among the great cloud of witnesses are those who had faith, hope, and love whether humanely educated or not. You can be a Christian without the liberal arts; you can be a saint without the Great Books or the Great Conversation, and attempting to justify ourselves as practical is disingenuous and stunted. We are not here to train you or to make you useful. We educate, we do not train, because my colleagues and I, and you, are persons; not insects, but icons of God, adopted children of the Father, sisters and brothers of Christ.

In saying this, I expose myself to the stark question posed earlier. If we trained, we would contribute instrumentally to saving eternal souls and bodies. But I cannot give this answer. I’ve denied it. It’s not available to me. So why have we invited you into our fellowship, into our little platoon or communion, if membership brings with it the threat of cultured frivolousness? Isn’t it enough that we risk our own souls, why should we bring you with us?

In the Gospel read earlier, Jesus reclines at Simon’s table when a woman anoints Jesus with oil; the other Gospels indicate it was Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. Jesus is in danger, the “chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to arrest him by stealth, and kill him,” at which they succeeded, the anointing occurring just two days before the Passover, and yet he attends to the ordinary (and therefore lovely) things like eating, teaching, conversation, and friendship. As you know, washing of guest’s feet was customary, so too was anointing their head with a drop of oil. She gives more than a dollop, however, but an entire alabaster jar of “very costly” ointment, worth something like a year’s salary. So valuable was this, and so costly, that it’s quite possible that