

PUT THOU MY TEARS IN THY BOTTLE

“Put thou my tears in thy bottle! Are they not in thy book?”

Christians should be happy, joyful, enthusiastic, optimistic people. They know who they are and who loves them. They know who their God is. They know their Savior, and that He will go to any lengths to rescue them. They live for a Kingdom that is both here and coming. They know where they are going, and that Heaven will be a great adventure, and that the power of the Resurrection means not only life forever, but LIFE – real, and true, and authentic LIFE.

Therefore, Christians do not take pain or death or defeat or loss very seriously. It is only a passing shadow. It is only part of this “boot camp” – a thing to be learned from, a part of the pilgrimage. The hope and faith and love of the Christian believer outrank and surface above anything and everything this world can produce or destroy. Therefore Christians are happy, joyful, enthusiastic, optimistic people.

Essentially, and in the long run, this is really true. And there are times, like at Easter, when we are all freshly reminded – and freshly grateful. But is every Christian’s name “Pollyanna”? We still live in a hard and broken world. No moment of joy lasts here. Sometimes, from our perspective, the passing shadows take a very long time to pass. Without reducing our faith and hope in the Resurrection one whit, is it not also true that, in some ways, Easter actually heightens our awareness of all that is wrong here? Our souls do not like all the anguish going on all around us, and sometimes in us. And while we have a great future and a great hope, we still live in the *meantime*. And it can get very “mean” indeed.

Sometimes I get concerned about the subtle, and not so subtle, pressure our society applies to the end of the spectrum where everybody should act positive and happy. Never mind what you feel, fear, doubt, or wonder about. Look and talk positive, and act happy. If you don’t feel it – fake it!

I think that is excellent advice – in public. Why should we have to check out our groceries with a clerk who is weeping, or listen to a plumber’s personal woes when he should be fixing the pipes? But our public mask is neither for joy nor for sorrow. It is to be effective and,

when possible, pleasant. Its purpose is neither to be real nor to personally relate, but to accomplish. It is important for us to know our roles, and to be able to play them well. If we do not think they are important, we should drop them and get some new ones we care about. But is it not equally important for us to remember to drop these roles with friends, and family, and fellow Christians? That was part of the meaning of the Christian name, in former times. At baptism, you received a new name: a name to be used not in public, but among fellow Christians – in the church, among the *ecclesia* – where you drop the public mask and get real. By the way, it never meant that the public mask was unworthy, unnecessary, or unconnected to our Christian Life – in its proper place and for its rightful function.

Today I want to talk about tears, especially the inner tears that well-up from the soul ... the tears too deep to share with others ... the tears too deep to share with any except the faithful few ... the tears that burn the heart and scarcely ever streak our well-trained faces. There are some things that Christians are, besides happy, joyful, enthusiastic, and optimistic. Christians are also angry, impatient, sorrowful, and weary. If you know anything about any of the saints, you know this is true. Christians are happy, joyful, enthusiastic, optimistic people. Christians are also angry, impatient, sorrowful, weary people. I do not mean that some Christians are one way and some the other. I mean that life has many dimensions, and authentic people know both ends of the spectrum – and often both ends at the same time.

Why would we expect it to be otherwise? If you have no pain in your soul for the pain in our world, you must be blind, or asleep, or *terribly* unloving. If you feel no anger for the oppressed, no burning desire to right some of the wrongs, no urge to change some of the structures that seem so inhumane – or that corrupt or cremate the gifts of God's children – then you know precious little about Jesus. If you do not get weary – soul-weary and heartsick to see how little your labor can truly accomplish, and how even your greatest efforts fail to achieve what you care about most – if you do not get weary, you have some weird kind of faith that has very little to do with what Jesus was doing. (And He did get terribly weary.)

If we did not know the Christian Faith – if we did not have much HOPE (Christian-size) – then maybe we could keep an even keel, and always be smiling and unperturbed. But the very hope that inspires us

also gets us into the fray – where we also run into our anger, impatience, sorrow, and bone-deep weariness. If you know the hope of Heaven, it is not possible to stay very pleased with this world.

It is said that Jesus was “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.” If Jesus was, why do we listen to the people who tell us we are not supposed to be? Jesus was also a man of banquets, and parties, and some of the most fantastic friendships the world has ever seen. But He was not just laughing it off. Too much is wrong here. Too many people hurt too much here. Sorrow is a very deep well, and some people have drowned in it, to be sure. But its depth and its danger are also its value. To board up the well and never drink from it again is to shut off one of the greatest channels of the Holy Spirit.

If God had made us with no feelings – no capacity for anguish or sorrow – then we would not be capable of perceiving the Kingdom either, or of longing for a better life or a better WAY. If we go sorrowful and stay there, soon we drown and accomplish nothing. But sorrow is not normally negation, or negativity. Sorrow is most often found where there is great caring and deep valuing. Sorrow is often the twin of great hope. (Because hope, by definition, is not yet realized.) To kill sorrow is to kill part of the soul. Those who have not joined the ranks of the “walking dead” know the deep inner tears of the soul, and all the faith in the world will not shut them off. Very frequently, it is faith that brings them! We know that this world is alienated from God. We sing that “This world is not my home, I’m just passing through.” If Christ were not here with us, who or what could persuade us to stay another hour?

So, on the inside at least, there are tears. To read a newspaper is to weep. There are tears for the absence of “peace.” They are tears for the way Life is betrayed by a Sin that goes deeper than all the answers our world can devise. There are tears for those who get lost; for women who wait; for children who will never know. There are tears because noble ideas pit people against each other; because survival for some, means loss for others; because more than “nature” is red in tooth and claw.

There are bitter tears for the little-known people whom we have come to know, because the heart does not distinguish between a world tragedy and the suffering of one true friend. If the heart knows and loves, the loss of one aches just as badly as the loss of all.

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We weep when we realize that we have indeed been driven out of Eden – when we begin to know what that has meant and done to us, and what it has meant and done to everyone around us. There are tears for all the many kinds of fig leaves that hide us from each other, and from ourselves, and by which we try to hide from God. Tears are always a mark of our feeling sorry for ourselves. Behind the brave exteriors, there is real reason for that! Part of it is feeling sorry for others when, from within, we realize that all those around us are bound up with us in a unity that makes us part of each other. Woe to the man or woman whose life is so small and whose hope is so dead that there is no sorrow over the loss of Eden – of true community – of brothers and sisters dwelling together in peace.

That which calls forth tears, when it is not in pretense or for effect, reveals the holy of holies within us. For that reason, we guard our real tears carefully from one another. Often we wonder if we are the only ones who feel so deeply, or hurt so badly. Others do not seem to, on the surface, any more than we do. So we kid ourselves that “nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen” or feels the longings we feel. So we do not share our tears with others, nor do they share their tears with us – especially not the *real* ones. Then we try to hide them even from our own inward selves. There are so many ... and what good are they ... and what can we do with them? So we curse or slap or kick ourselves back into line. We tell ourselves that showing our tears is no way to handle it. The tears are too many and would drown us – ruin whatever effectiveness, plans, or pleasures we have left. Board up the well of sorrow. Throw dirt and tumbleweeds and rocks on top. Pretend it is no longer there.

It can work too, in a way, for a while. It also kills sensitivity and caring, and slowly turns us into cynics or human scavengers. But what other way is there? Faith and hope merely increase the inner tears. Guaranteed! A person without hope *never* cries. Faith and hope breed love, and love brings with it an unbearable pain for all that maims and destroys and degrades what God has made. If you have been growing in faith in recent months, you know that you feel more alive and aware than ever before. Have you not also wondered why the inner pain is also increasing? That is the price of coming to Life – it is the inevitable cost of a growing love. If the price is too high, we cannot remain faithful. Hence the saying, “In Christ’s army, only the wounded soldiers can fight.” But what can we do with the tears?

Self-pity is right at the top of the “scorn list” in our culture. Strangely enough, social-pity, which is the same thing only one level up, is still much approved. Therefore, many people transpose their self-pity into social-pity so they can express some of their inner anguish without so much scorn. We can feel sorry for the spotted owls, or the whales, or the poor, or the hungry – and sometimes we have only projected our own personal issues and sorrows onto these causes. It is one reason, I suspect, why such causes are often filled with huge portions of emotion and small portions of effectiveness. In any case, self-pity and social-pity usually have authentic reasons behind them. The problem is not false sentiment; the problem is that we cannot build on negatives. While sorrow can fuel a great determination to help others and to improve things, very often it sucks us into depression, anger, or resentment, or a desire to go brood our lives away, alone. It is the Law of Life: we cannot build on negatives.

But we need the pity and the sorrow to keep aware of who we are and what we care about. We also need them to keep our spiritual radar operative. That is what King David is doing in many of his psalms. He honors his pain, gets back in touch with how he really feels, and then moves past it to the task at hand. Please try it – if you don’t already. Spend ten or fifteen minutes every day feeling sorry for yourself. Get back in touch with where you hurt, how much you care, how you feel about people, and what is happening around you. Never mind if it is right, correct, or empirically provable, or if the majority of those you know would approve of how you feel. Just let your heart talk to your soul. If you do, your soul will start talking to your heart – and often, the Holy Spirit will chime in too. Set your alarm clock as a safety net, so you don’t spend too much time in the garden of grief. When it rings, wrap it up, and go back to work. That’s it for the day. I really think this is one of the secrets of David’s effectiveness – and of Jesus’ effectiveness, and of Paul’s, and many of those we honor.

In any case, one day my eye caught and held this strange phrase from Psalm 56. It seemed like a treasure, and it still does. “*Put thou my tears in thy bottle! Are they not in thy book?*” When it gets too big, God must hold it for us. Otherwise, we would indeed be overcome, and drowned, and lost in pain and sorrow.

“Tears in God’s bottle” brings a strange picture to mind. It had never occurred to me to think of God as One who would collect tears and keep them as something valuable – giving them even future significance.

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Tears, I thought, were the overflow of badly managed emotions. Tears were the enemy. God was a God of joy, a God of Creation – and much too busy to care about my little tears. Being ashamed of them, and having run from them for so long, I had not yet seen that God’s kind of joy *brings* tears, in this world, because God’s joy is always so incomplete here.

Somehow I feel an overwhelming gratitude for the God who gathers our tears in his bottle and keeps them as something precious – who gathers our sorrows ... who does not laugh, or grow angry, or reject us for our inner pain ... who is not embarrassed by our sincere anguish, but honors it – the God who holds our tears for us, that we may set them aside and go on with our journey here.

Of course, not all of our tears are precious. Sometimes we beat our breasts for the effect it will have. Sometimes even our inner tears are only a crying over spilt milk. Some of the pain in our hearts springs from unfulfilled longings that we are foolish to entertain in the first place. Perhaps God puts these tears in his bottle also, but we hope not. They would only dilute the contents.

But the tears that spring from the depths of genuine compassion – the tears that burn for an answer that will not come, and scald our souls for the wounds we cannot heal – in the mystery of God’s heart, they are neither wasted nor forgotten. Gently, God gathers them and keeps them as a precious gift – a part of the beauty and compassion of souls coming to Life.

Which of you has not had a friend or a relative who fell into one of life’s traps and was injured or killed? They had some flaw or blind-spot that carried with it the seeds of destruction. Perhaps you knew or sensed another possibility, if only God could be allowed to heal and to lead. But the person would not or could not listen, until finally there was nothing left except to stand and watch that life crumble. Nothing left to think, or say, or do. Nothing left ... except the tears.

Say what you will about humans, but in some ways we do bear a resemblance to our Lord: “Having loved our own, we love them to the end.” O God, “*Put thou my tears in thy bottle,*” or there is no going on.

Some of the tears are for our own lives as well. Tears because we are not like the person we once dreamed of being. Sorrow for the good we longed to do but were unable to accomplish. Tears for mistakes, and

for our own injustice and cruelty. Tears, even, for those we loved who never knew it, or who knew it but never guessed at its depths. Tears because our lives seem so small and limited, and we can only be a very few things to a very few people.

It does bring to mind one of my favorite stories.

An angel once disobeyed God. Summoned before the throne of judgment, the angel begged for mercy. God said, "I shall not punish you, but in atonement for your sin, you must go to earth and bring back for me the most precious thing in the world."

The angel flew down to earth and traversed hills and valleys, seas and rivers, in search of the most precious thing in the world. Finally, after several years, the angel came upon a battlefield and beheld a brave soldier dying of the wounds he had received in defense of his country. The angel seized a drop of blood and brought it to the throne of glory, and said, "Lord God, surely this is the most precious thing in the world. Greater love hath no man than this, to lay down his life for his fellows." God said, "Indeed, O Angel, this is precious in my sight! But it is not the *most* precious thing in the world."

So the angel returned to earth and, after many more years of wandering, came to a hospital where a nurse lay dying of a dread disease she had contracted while nursing others. As the last breath passed from her body, the angel caught it up and brought it to the throne of glory, saying, "O Lord God, surely such unselfish service on behalf of others is the most precious thing in the world." God smiled upon the angel and said, "Indeed, O Angel, sacrifice on behalf of others is truly precious to me! But go once again to earth, and bring me back the *most* precious thing of all."

This angel had not heard about seventy times seven, and did not know how many more chances he had, so this time the angel wandered the earth for many generations, searching all lands and peoples. One evening it happened that the angel beheld a villainous-looking man riding through a dark forest. He was armed with sword and buckler, with bow and arrows. He was going to the house of his enemy to destroy him.

As he approached the house in stealth, light streamed through the windows, and the members of the household were seen going about their business all unsuspecting. The villain approached and looked

through the window. There he saw the wife putting her little son to bed, teaching him to pray and thank God for his blessings. As he watched, the villain began to lose the murder that was in his heart. He remembered his own childhood, and how his own mother had put him to bed and had taught him to pray.

The hardness of his heart melted as he realized what his life had become, and how far he had strayed from God. Casting his weapons aside, he stumbled back through the forest with tears burning down his face. The angel caught one of the tears, and flew with it to the throne of God. This time he presented it without a word.

“Well done, Angel,” beamed The Almighty. “Because the tears of repentance bring my children back to me, and lead to new life, and open the gates of Heaven – you have brought me the most precious thing in the world.”

I once told this story and a very earnest young man came up to me later and said, “I think your story is wrong. The most precious thing in the world is the blood of Christ.” I said, “You are absolutely right. But without your tears of repentance, what good will come from His blood?” (This young man is now pastor of our church in Omaha, Nebraska.)

Somewhere, sometime – if not in this world, then in the next – conditions will be changed ... hidden possibilities will be revealed ... Christ’s Kingdom will be victorious. That is the faith by which we live, and by which we die. It is our proper, unswerving answer to evil and pain and sorrow. But you and I live for it and toward it, while meanwhile going through many days and years when that victory seems far, far away. What can we do, between now and then, with the tears? To the eternal hope of the Christian Faith, we sing our dauntless *Hallelujahs!* But sometimes also, alone on our knees, we are glad to be able to pray: “*Put thou my tears in thy bottle ... Record my sorrow and my anguish, and keep them for me, O God, or I cannot go on.*”

Like David, we do that not to stay in sorrow or remorse, but because we need to get back to what we are here to do. And yet it waits, and many of our tears have no solution here. So God holds our tears for us – those too much for us to handle – until another time and a better place when our souls will have grown big enough and free enough to take back the tears, one at a time, and turn them into joy.