

MINUTE MUSINGS

1-6, while in the Passaic County Jail, Oct '98-Jun '00

1

John 20:25, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put *my* fingers where the nails were...I will not believe."

Before the trauma of Jesus' crucifixion "doubting Thomas" was courageous and full of faith. But Jesus' trial and execution shook Thomas' faith. His earlier trust in the goodness and justice of God now seemed naive and illusory. It was as if God or the devil or whoever had thrown a bucket of water over the sand castle he once imagined to be a fortress.

The events of the past 27 months have challenged my own perceptions of the reality of God, his goodness and justice, and his "very great and precious promises." I've read treatises on theodicy and listened (often impatiently) to my friends' well-intentioned arguments. At times I despair of trying to figure it out. Like Thomas, I'm not sure I can be satisfied now with anything less than some kind of first-hand encounter with the Lord. If he grants me such a revelation I know I won't need anything else. And if he doesn't? Well, there are Jesus' own words to consider: "Blessed are those who have **not** seen, and yet have believed."

2

Philippians 1:19, "I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance."

During this first week at Passaic County Jail I have been very conscious of the mercies of the Lord. I find myself in solitary confinement. Many prisoners, perhaps most, would find this "cruel and unusual" punishment. But not I. Such privacy is a blessing, given my disorientation of body and soul. It came about because of Georgia's professional relationship with Sheriff Englehardt. (Georgia wasn't thinking of my privacy but of my personal safety when she approached the Sheriff on the matter.) Similarly, Deputy Warden Henion, a fellow church member, visits me daily and arranges small conveniences that I greatly appreciate. And Sgt. Williams stopped by during his tour of duty last night, urging me to "keep the faith, brother; don't be discouraged."

3

Jeremiah 5:22, "I made the sand a boundary for the sea, an everlasting barrier it cannot cross. The waves may roll, but they cannot prevail; they may roar, but they cannot cross it."

This cell is my God-given shore. The world's waves may continue to roll and roar. But they cannot touch me. I am in God's care. In due time I will return to the world stronger than ever. For two long years I have been maligned and vilified, in court and in the local press. At times the

pain has been al-most unbearable. But now I feel safe – like a badly wounded bear having limped and crawled its way back to a warm, dark cave, there to lick its wounds and hibernate till spring arrives. I have the strange sense that I need this time of isolation and solitude. Battered and bruised, I am tired of fighting the world. This cell is a haven for me, my own biblical city of refuge.

4

Matthew 9:29, “According to your faith will it be done to you.”

A good friend expressed the hope that I will receive from God “the spiritual equivalent of a warm hug.” Another sent a card with a verse that read, “I am praying that his compassion will surround you like a warm embrace.” Is this in fact my experience? Unlike other cells here, which are akin to cages, my cell has four solid walls, with an equally solid steel door and an opaque window. So I’m completely encased. This could seem suffocating, but I have come to interpret these walls as my warm embrace by God. I don’t actually “feel” this embrace, but I *choose* to interpret the walls this way. It is my expression of faith. Faith is not only a gift of God – it is an act of will, as Jesus pointed out to the two blind men Here in prison, offered the contrasting options of suffocation or embrace, I sense I am required to exercise my own will in believing that God means these walls as a blessing, not a curse.

5

Philippians 1:12, “Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.”

“Keep in mind, this isn’t just about **you!**” Jim Phillips, long-time missionary to Japan, visited me yesterday, escorted by Georgia. I was sharing a little of what I am learning, and a lot of what I am struggling with. That’s when Georgia interjected her comment. Not long ago Cardinal Bernardin of Chicago was falsely accused of molesting a minor. Soon after his accuser recanted the Cardinal was stricken with cancer. His last months were filled with intense pain. He comments that when a person is subjected to unendurable pain it is nearly impossible to think of anything but one’s own suffering. At such times it is easy to become self-centered, to assume that “this is just about me.” So I am grateful for Georgia’s reminder. God has purposes in my imprisonment that transcend me. One of them surely must be what he is doing in Georgia’s life. She is becoming a very strong person.

Proverbs 20:24, "A man's steps are directed by the Lord; how then can anyone understand his own way?"

Today is my birthday. If anyone had asked me, years ago, whether I was planning to celebrate my 70th birthday in prison, I would have replied, "Are you crazy?" Yet here I am. James Barrie, the Scot who wrote *Peter Pan*, observed that "the life of every man is a diary in which he means to write one story – and writes another."

Bill Young visited me last week. He too commented on both the certainty and mystery of Providence, sharing Psalm 77:19, "Your path led through the sea, your way through the mighty waters, though your *footprints* were not seen." (That is the point made in the well-known little tale entitled *Footprints*, the last paragraph of which reads, "The Lord replied, 'My child...during your times of trial and suffering, when you saw only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you.'") Eugene Peterson in *Leap Over a Wall* says that friendship is a much underestimated aspect of spirituality. Friendship and *loyalty*, I would say. During this past year I have come to value these more deeply than ever. They have been my safety net.

7-9, while at CRAF, Jul-Aug '00

John 14:1 "Let not your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me."

I am at CRAF [Central Receiving and Assignment Facility]. A fouler place I cannot imagine. My heart is troubled. The biblical "heart" is more than emotions. It includes mind – thought and rationality – as well. My mind is troubled by traumatic events that seem to defy logic. Faith in God – "You believe in God" -- is a balm for the troubled heart. But Jesus says, "Have faith in *me* also. I too am part of the solution to whatever is troubling you." My own faith in God has been restored to a large extent – or so it seems to me, though that has yet to be tested. But in the process my faith in Jesus (a distinction Jesus himself makes here) has become a bit foggy. So I await the arrival of the New Testament Dan Groh is sending me. I want to read and re-read the four Gospels in the light of my experience these past four years. I think of this as part of the "renewing of your mind" that Paul speaks of in Romans 12.

I Timothy 6:6, "Godliness with contentment is great gain."

Paul claimed he had learned to be content in whatever state he found himself. I believe this is true of me in my present situation. Certainly I've learned to accept the physical constraints and oppressiveness of incarceration. I still have difficulty understanding why God allows me to

be imprisoned when both Georgia and Brittney, for different reasons, need me at home. I experience a mild but continuing resentment against a system that confines me long past my parole eligibility date, but I'm prepared to leave that in God's hands. Perhaps that is "godliness with contentment." If so, it is a "great gain" over being consumed by bitterness and self-pity, as some inmates are.

9

Philippians 3:8, "I count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord."

This verse envisions a trade-off. Would I trade "all things" for the (experiential) knowledge of Christ? Family? Career? Reputation? I can't say for sure. To assert an unequivocal "yes" smacks of hubris. But I know one thing: Had I gone to prison twenty years ago I might well have invested the rest of my life exposing and fighting the injustice of the justice system. But at this stage of my life I am far less interested in correcting an injustice than I am in acquiring true wisdom – understanding God's ways and the role of Jesus the Mediator. This is the real and very practical trade-off I have made.

10-30, while at Mid-State, Sep '00-Mar'03

10

I Corinthians 11:28, "Let a man examine himself."

Socrates insisted the unexamined life is not worth living. Several times in the past I have paused to seriously examine my life, but I was unable to reach satisfying conclusions because I was using the wrong lenses. This present trauma has given me clearer lenses. I can identify more easily my own failings and shortcomings and assume responsibility for them. One of the main purposes of writing my autobiography is to give a clear-eyed account of my life. I got a very good start on it while at Passaic County Jail, but my transfer from PCJ to CRAF and now to Mid-State [Correctional Facility] has disrupted this. I can only hope to resume it at some point in the future.

11

Galatians 2:6, "God shows personal favoritism to no man."

I dare say God in his mercy showed a *great deal* of favoritism toward me when I was in the Passaic County Jail. Through the kindness of the deputy warden I had a private cell, special privileges (contact visits with Georgia, a writing desk, pencil sharpener, books, etc.) and the opportunity to relate to other prisoners on my own terms (e.g., by tutoring). But here at Mid-State God has allowed all this to be taken away. I am now an anonymous one of 600 inmates, immersed in the same odious environment 24 hours a day, seven days a

week. No difference here between a missionary and a drug dealer. We are all prisoners. For me, this is the ultimate in Incarnation and helps me appreciate Jesus' voluntary *kenosis* better.

12

Romans 1:20, "Since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood by what has been made..."

Which invisible attributes? His power? Yes. His intelligence? Yes. His wisdom, love, goodness? No. These are **not** clearly seen in the creation, at least by me, though they are surely part of the divine nature. Contrariwise, "what has been made" often demonstrates randomness, evil, and apparent meaninglessness. This failure to reveal divine nature may not be due to any defect in creation. It may simply reflect the limitations of human nature. Whatever the reason, only some, not all, of God's attributes are clearly seen in creation. By and large, evangelicals have not satisfactorily integrated the modern understanding of an evolving universe with the Gospel. This is one of the matters that preoccupies me during my imprisonment. I would like my own worldview to adequately reflect both the Gospel and what contemporary science reveals about reality.

13

Psalms 119:108, "O Lord...teach me your laws." (Alternative translations: "teach me your judgments.")

The two translations are identical. This is Psalm 119 where poetic parallelism prevails. Judgments is an apt word because it connotes the moral dimension of God's law. It is appropriate therefore for me to ask, "Do God's judgments reveal that we live in a moral universe?" Is this what I learn from his judgments? Certainly nature doesn't reveal this, despite Paul's contention in Romans 1. Where then did the psalmist and prophets get the idea? From history. Does this include one's own personal history? Yes, they answer. God rewards good and punishes evil in nations, clans, and individuals. To me this answer does not satisfy because in truth nature, history, and personal experience are ambiguous. What happens to people appears to be quite random. Some evil gets punished; much doesn't. Some good is rewarded; much isn't. How then can I learn for certain whether I live in a moral universe?

14

Psalms 73:1, "Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart."

Asaph tried to solve the enigma outlined in yesterday's musing. "When I tried to understand this, it was oppressive to me," he admits, "*till I entered the sanctuary of God*; then I understood their final destiny." But a close reading of the psalm shows that what he came to understand was

not all that conclusive. He envisioned the wicked sooner or later getting their just deserts in this life. "How suddenly they are destroyed, completely swept away by terrors!" No doubt that is true in some instances – Hitler committing suicide in the ruins of Nazi Germany is an example. But many other evildoers die peacefully in bed, having never been brought to account. So in the Christian tradition, "after death comes judgment" (Hebrews 9:27).

But this is an article of faith, not a rational explanation, for the final judgment hasn't happened yet. Asaph was bothered because he, a good man, was being oppressed. "All day long I have been plagued," he moaned. "I have been punished every morning." He couldn't make sense of his own situation. And though, in my opinion, he didn't solve the puzzle, he did come to terms with it "in the sanctuary of God," that is, in God's presence. Jesus also wrestled with this moral dilemma in the Garden of Gethsemane – his "sanctuary of God." And, like Asaph, came to terms with it, though without resolving all of his questions, either. The following day he still cries out, "Why have you abandoned me?"

15

1 Corinthians 11:31, "But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment."

Like Asaph, like Jesus, I too have been struggling with the issue of the moral nature of God's governance since August of 1996, and especially since being convicted and imprisoned. Why am I being punished? If it's for a crime of which I was wrongly convicted, then I am being punished unjustly. How can that be if we live in a moral universe? But perhaps there are other, truer, reasons for my punishment.

Perhaps I am suffering for past sins for which I never held myself accountable. Or perhaps this incarceration is God's special way of preserving me from committing some terrible sin in the future. Hezekiah suspected this was true in his case. "Surely it was for my benefit that I suffered such anguish. In your love you kept me from the pit of destruction" (Isaiah 38:17). Or perhaps I am suffering vicariously, as Jesus did, as a scapegoat for the sins of others.

None of these possibilities are entirely satisfying, and none by themselves convince me that I live in a moral universe. But I have worked through the problem in the presence of God and find myself at peace. Prison is the sanctuary of God for me.

16

Job 2:13, "They sat down with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him."

Then they began to debate with him. Commentators criticize them for this, but actually they did a good thing. Not because their advice was good (it wasn't, though well-intentioned). Rather, it gave Job opportunity to express himself to them and to God. The point being made in the present verse, however, is that they did not begin to counsel Job until they had thoroughly identified with him in his grief and disorientation. As

I look back upon the first two years of my ordeal before I was actually incarcerated, it is evident that the friends who helped me most were not those who "advised" me, but those who "sat with me," expressing love and loyalty without judging – something most of us, myself included, have great difficulty doing.

17

Matthew 5:44, "Love your enemies...do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you."

It is not easy to accept that Georgia and I have enemies, people who wish ill of us. Some are enemies merely by position (e.g. Democrats and Republicans). Neither hate nor spite are necessarily involved. (I doubt that any of Georgia's political enemies actually harbor ill feelings toward her – except perhaps John C, the leader of her own party!) But all of us, Georgia and myself included, have had people spitefully use us. This was certainly so at my trial. And spite causes great damage, emotional and physical. The damage may be healed, but the scars I will carry to my grave. Jesus says that prayer is the only efficacious response to spite. Praying for an enemy [specifically, praying that God would bless them} overcomes my natural, seething resentment of being "used."

18

Hebrews 12:14-15, "Make every effort to live in peace with all men....that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many."

Two related concepts are at issue here: pursuing peace and squelching bitterness. It is the failure to pursue peace that allows the root of bitterness to expand and corrupt others. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, they say. This is why Jesus exhorted us to "Love...pray for those who spitefully use you." Bitterness is usually the fruit of spite or betrayal. Bitterness can poison a whole community, whether a family, a church, or a mission society.

I owe it to the grace of God that for the most part, by love and prayer and pursuing the well-being of others, I have starved, though perhaps not killed, the roots of bitterness in my own life. Having said that, I recognize I am making a fine and perhaps invalid distinction between bitterness and resentment, for a certain level of resentment still persists toward those who have harmed me. Others, in turn, doubtless resent my behavior toward them. I can only pray that their resentment will not descend to bitterness.

19

Psalms 71:8, "Let my mouth be filled with your praise and with your glory all the day."

For as long as I can remember I have lived in the presence of God. There has rarely been a time, if ever, when he has been absent from my consciousness. Even my sins have been committed not in defiance of him but in openness to him. However, I cannot say I have vocalized this

much, as the psalmist would have me do. My mouth has not broadcast his praises. Oddly enough, though, I had a dream the other night in which I was teaching Brittney how to pray, and in doing so we were specifically praising God for his attributes.

20

John 15:13, "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for one's friends."

Jesus is referencing his coming execution. He died for all, but his death has special meaning for his friends, i.e. his disciples. Am I his friend? To make a reasonable interpretation of this I have to understand "laying down" my life not exclusively in terms of death but as sacrificial service. We ought to serve everyone, and HMI [Holistic Ministries International] provides a means to do so. But HMI also furnishes opportunity to serve our "friends" – those who labor with us in the ministry (staff, donors, volunteers) – in a special way. This should be a source of pleasure to us. Even in prison I am able, in modest ways, through prayer and letter-writing, to serve my "friends."

21

John 15:14, "You are my friends if you do what I command."

This is a strange verse, following as it does upon verse 13. Obedience is the basis for friendship? I don't understand this. Obedience is the appropriate basis for a master-servant relationship, which Jesus himself disavows in the following verse 15! One possible interpretation: the "whatever I command" refers specifically to the ultimate imperative, "...that you love one another." I do not have an exclusive relationship with Jesus, but only in the company of others whom I must love.

22

Romans 16:20, "The God of peace will crush Satan under your feet shortly."

This verse also is hard for me to get a hold of. For a start, it presumes the use of violence ("crush") in pursuit of peace. This seems to be a violation of the precept that ends and means should be compatible. The American prison system uses force to compel peace. Is God limited to the same pattern?

The verse does not begin with a direct "Thus saith the Lord," yet I am supposed to accept it as inspired. It presupposes that the hardships of first-century disciples in Rome are the result of Satan's activity and/or influence. And I have difficulty believing in personalized demonic forces. It draws on the promise to Eve in Genesis 3. But this is usually interpreted as foretelling Messiah's ultimate defeat of Satan, not a temporary relief of the persecution of a particular group of Christians. And it speaks of "shortly." If this refers to Jesus' ultimate victory, it is obviously mistaken. But if it refers instead to the first-century situation

(a prophecy of the downfall of Emperor Nero} does it have any real relevance to me in the 21st?

23

Ephesians 6:4, "Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord."

"Exasperate" suggests deliberate taunting, or the frustration of a child's reasonable desires. I don't think I was ever guilty of this...I cannot recall any such occasion. To whatever extent I am responsible for my children's difficulty in finding fulfillment in evangelical religion, I believe it is because of the tension between Joan and me that permeated our household. This sabotaged our Christian credibility, so far as our children were concerned. It could be that this was a frustration of their natural expectations, and in that sense it must have been exasperating. On the other hand, this was not deliberate on my part, nor on Joan's, for that matter. Also other factors, having little to do with Joan or me, were operative as well.

24

2 Corinthians 5:15, [Christ] "died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves."

I can recollect numerous times in my life when I subordinated my personal interests to those of Christ's or other people's. But I have to acknowledge that at other times, wittingly or unwittingly, I gave my own interests priority. An example of the latter was the period of my divorce. I say this because I took the initiative in it. At the time I believed I had no other choice. It was divorce as opposed to insanity or suicide. And even now in hindsight I do not see a viable alternative. There was, in fact, an alternative – but not a "viable" one. That is, Joan and I could have set about to restructure our whole lives. However, at the time, I had no idea of how to do that, nor was I motivated to do so. So God, after waiting another decade and a half, has done it for me via the trauma of trial and prison.

25

Psalms 119:2, "Blessed are they who keep his statutes and seek him with all their heart."

This is poetic parallelism again. Those who keep God's testimonies are those who seek him wholeheartedly – and vice versa. Obedience is equated with the God-centered search. Kierkegaard insisted that "purity of heart is to will one thing." The psalmist says that one thing is faithfulness to the law of God.

In my view this is a peculiarly Jewish (and Muslim) perspective, where the focus is on Law. Loving one another becomes the ultimate obedience, not the keeping of X number of sterile statutes. The New Testament changes the lens. Jesus says, "Love God, and love your

neighbor." St. Augustine said, in effect, "Love God, and do as you please."

Oddly, everyday Christianity has a hard time understanding this. When I was on the staff of The Navigators we routinely defined obedience in terms of various New Testament commands and exhortations.

26

Matthew 8:17b, "He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases."

We have several men with AIDS here on our tier. Evangelical response to the AIDS crisis since 1985 illustrates the conundrum I pondered in my previous "musing". Our moral code leads us to adopt the stance that AIDS sufferers (assumed to be gay, for the most part) bring their misery on themselves – and that this could even be thought of as God's judgment.

Consequently, as compared with other sectors of society, evangelicals have been slow to take concrete steps to alleviate the suffering or research the cure. In loyalty to our moral code we pass judgment on our neighbor and, without much thought, conclude that since he (or she) behaves badly we do not need to love him or her, or even show compassion in any concrete way. Of course we opine, "Hate the sin but love the sinner." But this is hypocrisy, for how can we say we love the sinner if we do not respond to his or her personal crisis other than to condemn? We find it hard to hate the sin without hating the sinner as well.

27

Proverbs 23:4, "Do not overwork to be rich; because of your own understanding, cease!"

I have never worked – much less overworked – to be rich, but I have overworked, to the neglect of my family, to be successful in mission. I have also been guilty, at times, in urging others to overwork in the ministry without warning them that this might sabotage their family life.

28

Luke 11:29, "This is an evil generation. It seeks a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah."

Every generation seeks signs. The unconscious purpose of a sign is to reduce risk, the risk inherent in commitment, the risk inherent in change – especially where such change works against the status quo or sets us against the world. But the sign Jesus offers – his resurrection – comes *after* the event, when the risk has already been taken, the leap of faith already made. In reading the Qur'an I note that Muhammad's opponents were always demanding a sign. Apparently that is expected of all prophets. One of the things I have learned in prison is to reject signs – as for example when my trial culminated on Good Friday and I hoped that Easter would result in my resurrection, that is, vindication. But the opposite happened.

Joshua 24:15, "Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve."

The issue is choice. Not whether to serve, but *whom* to serve. The children of Israel vacillated between Jehovah and the local gods of their cultural environment. Even though on this occasion they chose to serve Jehovah, on later occasions they chose to serve Baal, Astarte, and other deities. Even the dramatic experience of their Exodus redemption did not keep them from serving other gods. Jews became permanent theists only after the traumatic experience of Captivity. I see the parallel in my own life. Exodus was a positive event, Captivity a negative one. Yet only the latter has resulted in definitive purification.

Luke 9:37, "When they had come down from the mountain...a great multitude met them."

Although most would call my present situation a "valley," I experience it as a mountain top, an extended time alone with Jesus. I will be nearly 74 years of age when I finally "max out." Therefore I must prepare myself, mentally and emotionally, to minister to others when I come down – if not to multitudes, at least to a few friends. As Jesus told Peter on another occasion, "I have prayed for you, that your faith fail not; and when you are converted, strengthen your brothers [and sisters]." In my case, conversion has been first, renewed faith in God, and second, a complete overhaul of my working worldview.