Angels and Sparrows

June 6th, 2021

Most of the world does not know you and never will. What is more, most of the time, you might not know yourself—who you really are and where you are going. Most of us will not find a place in history; most of history has not been recorded, and even what has is subject to the little publicized but very real threat of information decay. The roads of the ancient Roman Empire were lined with the tombs of those who wanted to be remembered, who wanted somehow to remain relevant to the earth even after they had left it. There is something in us that wants our bodies and our minds to remain; there is something in us that resists being unknown, being lost to oblivion. In his book *The Private Lives of Ancient Romans,* Harold Whetstone Johnston remarked that Roman law “forbade the burial or even the burning of the dead within the walls of the city. For the very poor, places of burial were provided in localities outside the walls, corresponding in some degree to the potter's field of modern cities. The well-to-do made their burial places as conspicuous as their means would permit, with the hope that the inscriptions upon the monuments would keep alive the names and virtues of the dead, and with the idea, perhaps, that the dead still had some part in the busy life around them. To this end they lined the great roads on either side for miles out of the cities with rows of tombs of the most elaborate and costly architecture. In the vicinity of Rome, the Appian Way, as the oldest road, showed the monuments of the noblest and most ancient families, but none of the roads lacked such memorials. Many of these tombs were standing in the sixteenth century; few still remain” (Harold Whetstone Johnston, *The Private Lives of Ancient Romans,* Revised by Mary Johnston, Scott, Foresman and Company. 1903, 1932). Of all those monuments—few still remain! In our reading today, we encounter Cornelius, a Roman, a centurion, a man who was known in his own time—but who would have probably been forgotten had something rather strange not occurred. Cornelius wanted to know God. And to his surprise, he discovered that God had known him all along and had come to visit him personally.

In the Acts of the Apostles, we see Jesus as the Saviour of all humanity—Romans, Samaritans, Greeks, Ethiopians, Macedonians—the Book of Acts is filled with the names of countries, peoples, languages (Acts 2:5-13). God’s grace is truly being poured out on all flesh; all who call on the Lord are being saved, as preached in the second chapter. There is another element here that is worth noting. The Holy Spirit is transforming men and women: Paul of Tarsus, the Ethiopian Eunuch, Sergius Paulus, Lydia, the Philippian jailer, those wandering, leftover disciples of John the Baptist—all are given new lives in Christ through the work of the Spirit. For the apostle Peter, Cornelius was a religious outsider as well as an unwanted, heavily armed guest in his country. Peter does not hide his discomfort with coming into his house (Acts 10:28). And yet, when Jesus first met Peter, Peter was not an apostle; Peter was just a poor Galilean fisherman. And Matthew was a tax-collector. Mary Magdalene was a troubled woman. Lazarus was sickly. Thomas struggled with doubts. None of these people knew what the future looked like or what their role in the future would be; none of these really knew themselves or each other until they met Christ. When we look at ourselves or others, we see what we are able to see; we see what we want to see—but we cannot see what God sees. Jesus always saw more than what the others named in the gospels could see. In Peter, James and John, Jesus saw his best friends and his future apostles. In Mary Magdalene he saw a key witness to the resurrection. In John, Mark and Matthew, he saw future evangelists and writers of the gospel. That is indeed the power of redemption—but it is more than that. It is evidence of foreknowledge—that God is already there working in the person long before we meet someone. One of the great lessons of the Book of Acts is that the Holy Spirit is at work before the apostles arrive. That was explicitly the case of the Ethiopian eunuch, and it was also the case of Lydia in Macedonia (Acts 8:26-40; Acts 16:1-15). It was the case of Cornelius.

One of the most astonishing things in the story about Cornelius, however, is what the angel says to him: “Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God” (Acts 10:4). God was thinking about Cornelius. This clearly made an impression on the centurion because he repeats what the angel reported to Peter: “‘Four days ago at this very hour, at three o’clock, I was praying in my house when suddenly a man in dazzling clothes stood before me. He said, “Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God.”’”(Acts 10:30-31). It is one thing to be an apostle, to be a historical witness of the living and risen Christ like the apostles. The rest of us are like Cornelius—perhaps we feel a little more distance from God, trusting hopefully in the words of Jesus that says: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.’” (John 20:29). In the story of Cornelius, however, it is not about seeing—it is about being seen. It is about the fact that God sees me. God sees you. Sometimes we forget that God sees us—He sees every part of us. Proverbs says “The eyes of the Lord are in every place, keeping watch on the evil and the good” (Proverbs 15:3). One psalmist says: “O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely….For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well” (Psalm 139:1-4; 13-14). In another psalm, the Lord says: “I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you” (Psalm 32:8). And indeed, the angel of the Lord instructed Cornelius in what he should do. This is important: it not only means that God saw Cornelius; it also means that God was concerned for and pleased with Cornelius, that God loved Cornelius. Before you knew God, God knew you. God was seeking Cornelius, and He is seeking you. Eberhard Arnold writes: “God has opened his heart to us. He has turned his face to us. He comes to us, reveals his thoughts, and shows us who he is and what he wills. He gives us everything we need, and wants to perfect the work he has begun in us. Amazingly, we feeble and insignificant beings are the object of his concern. Out of the incomprehensible love of his heart, God loves each of us quite personally. In his concern for humankind, God seeks out all people and invites them to take part in his new creation. God wants each of us to respond to him personally and practically. He wants us to know his heart, accept his work, affirm his will, and carry it out. But most of all, God wants to give himself to us. He gives us his spirit so that we might live, act, and work just as his Word did when it became flesh.” (Eberhard Arnold, *Prayer That God Answers.* <https://www.plough.com/en/topics/faith/prayer/prayer-god-answers>*).* In our age we often speak of the wisdom of mindfulness. Wisdom is not mindfulness. No one is ever going to be mindful enough. Wisdom is not mindfulness as much as it is mindfulness about being minded, or thoughtfulness that God is thoughtful of us—God is watching you. God is watching you with a loving gaze. As Jesus taught: “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground unperceived by your Father” (Matthew 10:29). The Lord watches birds—and the Lord watches you.

Not only is Cornelius aware now that God sees him, Cornelius sees that God is pleased with him. I believe most of us have this vague concept of a watchful God, whose powers are somehow a little greater than satellites and quantum computers. I do not know how many of us learned of the God who is pleased with us, who receives our alms and our prayers as a memorial, who cares what we do with our hearts and with our lives. As Matthew Henry notes: “[Cornelius] is assured that God accepts him in walking according to the light he had …Cornelius prayed, and gave alms...in sincerity, as unto God; and he is here told that they were come up for a memorial before God. They were upon record in heaven, in the book of remembrance that is written there for all that fear God, and shall be remembered to his advantage…What he did he did in that faith, and was accepted of God in it” (Matthew Henry, regarding Acts 10:1-80). Jesus taught this to us: “Your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (Matthew 6:3-4, 6). Cornelius is living proof of this as and of what Jesus had already taught Peter: “‘Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!” (Matthew 7:7-11). What you do matters to God, and your seeking certainly matters and is rewarded.

One of the hardest things for people to experience is loneliness. Some days ago, I sat down by the river talking with a homeless man, sharing a bag of potato chips. It was a pleasant, cool day among the aspens and willows, and we got to talking. He has nobody left from his old days—everyone is gone. Not just his family back home in Saskatchewan, but also his friends and his surrogate family of the streets. They have all passed on. He told me it was hard to be alone, to know that nobody is thinking about you. That there is literally nobody out there who knows you. I thought how blessed I was—to have family, to have friends, to have the sacred family of the church, but more than that, to have the Lord Jesus. I am never alone, even if I feel lonely. Christoph Blumhardt once wrote: ““To feel close to God is a great comfort. It is depressing to feel alone and forsaken, to think that we have been left to our own resources and must rely on our own strength. I would not want to live a single day without being able to feel that God’s angels are around me, and around the whole world. I cannot live one day without believing that we are never alone.” (Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt and Johann Christoph Blumhardt, *Now Is Eternity: Comfort and Wisdom for Difficult Hours*. The Plough Publishing House, 1999. 3). Not long ago, I came into work where I teach reading and writing, and I found a gift on my table. It was a beautiful mug with a cat on it. It had been left by a student who had graduated and would not be coming back. All I knew about him was that he had a good sense of humour, a sharp wit, an interest in business and that he needed help with his essays. He knew quite a lot about me, however, or he took the time to find out. Somehow, he figured out that I love cats, and that I love to drink tea, and so he gave me that thoughtful gift—a tea mug with a cat painted on it. At first, I was just moved by his gratitude. He was thankful for the time I spent helping him. Then, the more I thought about it, I was grateful for his thoughtfulness. That he had taken the time to think about me. And in a greater, more inexplicable, transformative way, we need to remember that God is thoughtful of us.

God remembers us. Yes, God knows our unique weaknesses, our darkest sins, our saddest thoughts, our most bewildering confusion. God knows the bad things, but God also knows the good things. God knows our joys, our ambitions, our potential. God even knows what He will transform us into, as He did with Peter, James, and John, with Mary and Lydia. Jeremiah says: “For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart” (Jeremiah 29:11-13). And thus, we are never alone, and nothing we do is without meaning in His kingdom. Eberhard Arnold remarks: “God is always near, ready to listen to his people whenever they pray in accordance with his will. He is, to put it in other words, very close to us when we are so deeply in trouble that we have stopped looking for help from our own efforts or from any human source. He is near, very near, when we truly pray for nothing but the honor of his name, and ask for nothing but his intervention, his fire, his rain, the shining, streaming energy of his love.” (Eberhard Arnold, *The Prayer God Answers*).

Lastly, I want to speak of the openness of Cornelius. Cornelius followed the instructions of the angel. And when Peter came, Cornelius invited the apostle into his home—he showed great respect and great hospitality to God’s messenger. More importantly, he showed great hospitality and reverence to God, saying to Peter: “I sent for you immediately, and you have been kind enough to come. So now all of us are here in the presence of God to listen to all that the Lord has commanded you to say.’” (Acts 10:30-33). *All of us are here in the presence of God to listen to all that the Lord has commanded you to say*. That is thoughtful. That is humble. May we too be in the presence of God and listen to all that the Lord has commanded be said. May we be thoughtful of God, as our heavenly Father is thoughtful of us. It was the beginning of a great transformation for Cornelius; the word of God brought the reward for his prayers and alms: “While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word” (Acts 10:44). Redemption and transformation had come. Cornelius would never be distant from his Lord again. And I imagine he never prayed or sang the same way again. As an old, hymn quoting the words of Jesus, says it much more beautifully and much more succinctly: “I sing because I’m happy; I sing because I’m free; His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He’s watching me.”