

Living the Beautiful Life

By Charles Scriven



Photo: Tom Osborne

The day my seventeen-year-old son, Jeremy, blew his tee shot at the par-three fifteenth hole, I saw a thing of beauty. His ball soared high and sharply left, then skidded down a hill to a spot some twenty yards below the green. When Jeremy got there for his second shot, he couldn't even see the flag. From our vantage points, neither I nor our playing partner, Nate, could see Jeremy. I was lining up my second shot when Nate cried out: "Look at that!" My eyes twitched upward in time to see the end of a high shot that had landed softly and was now curving toward the hole. It dropped in with a plop. If the tee shot was ugly, this one was—beautiful. Jeremy heard our shouts. When his head appeared, he saw for himself that he had birdied the hole, and he broke into a grin.

That same week my eighty-six-year-old father arrived in town for our daughter Christina's wedding, and I imagined how he would have talked if he had seen that shot. "The beauty of it was," he'd have started, just like when I was a boy, and he would have gone on about how some new gizmo had worked, or "worked like a charm," another of his expressions.

A thing of beauty is something agreeable and pleasing, something that sparks delight—or even joy—in the beholder. Brides, by the way, are themselves fine examples of the beautiful. Scripture lovingly compares "the holy city, the New Jerusalem," to a "bride adorned for her husband."¹

Of course there is much more. The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, in his famous hymn to the beauty in God's world, voiced his delight in "rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim," in "pieced and plotted" landscapes, in "gear and tackle and trim" used in the various trades. Of the one who "fathers-forth" this vast array, he said simply: "Praise Him."²

Once I looked out my study window and saw beauty of another kind. My sons—one in his late teens then, the other only five or six—were in the yard wearing baseball gloves and bouncing a tennis ball off the back of our house. The younger, Jeremy, was imitating Jonathan, although for a little boy to cover the ten or twelve yards to the wall on the fly he had to wind up and heave the ball as high and hard as he could. To me the sight—the green grass, the rhythm of grounders bouncing off brick, the "chemistry" between the two boys—was a wonder. Not for a minute did Jeremy begrudge his brother the advice he gave or example he showed. Jonathan, for his part, loved the enthusiasm and growth that he saw in Jeremy.

When I first shared that experience in public, I meant to show how the obedience of faith is ideally like a child's imitation of his older brother: it is heartfelt and glad, not a burden, but a privilege. But midway into the

telling I was suddenly choking back tears. I had to stop and collect myself.

Later I would ponder why. From my vantage point, it now seems clear that I was overcome by beauty. For if golf shots, stippled trout, and plotted landscapes can evoke delight, loving human interactions can do that and more. These interactions exemplify a beauty that is not only delightful, but also, in some sense, awesome, a beauty that touches off, in addition to joy and gratitude, the deepest sort of poignancy.

A familiar hymn, which echoes Scripture, speaks of "the beauty of holiness."³ But the word "holiness" hints of experiences that leave many feeling uneasy, if not troubled. The thought of holiness may suggest something grim and tedious, or may set off dread or even fright. What, then, provokes such high commendation? What is holiness, and why do religious poets think it beautiful? Why do they question—or better, reject—the cliché that religion is about stern heavenly potentates and their guilty, joyless subjects?

The Beauty of Holiness

Consider Moses at the burning bush. After killing an Egyptian he fled to Midian, where he married Zipporah and tended the flock of Jethro, his father-in-law. Meanwhile, the Hebrew people were still groaning under Pharaoh's slavery. One day, near Mount Horeb, Moses stopped in his tracks at the sight of the amazing bush. It blazed but was not consumed, and he watched in fascination. Suddenly he heard the voice of God. Moses was to remove his sandals, "for the place on which you are standing is holy ground" (Exod. 3:6).

Here the fire's beauty and watcher's fascination became a theater for holiness. The scene was awesome, and the book of Exodus says that when Moses heard the voice, he "hid his face," reticent to look. But in his fascination he did listen, and he did hear a call from God to assist with the liberation of the Hebrew people from their bondage. His heart was moved: the fire and the words spoke of a God who was wholly different from the ordinary—and wholly committed to delivering the slaves from their misery. The rest of Exodus tells the story of how Moses responded, and of what God accomplished through him.

In this story, holiness is the awesome otherness of One who is radiant and compelling, like a bush that burns but is not consumed—the awesome otherness of One who is, at the same time, caring and involved, like parents who love their children and make sacrifices on their behalf.

"Give unto the Lord the glory due unto his name," says the Psalmist, "worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness" (Ps. 29:2 KJV). It is no wonder, for through the presence of the God of Moses, the holy is nothing short of glorious. It fascinates, pleases, and finally moves the human heart. It is a thing of beauty.

Zechariah the prophet pictures a coming Prince of Peace who rides into the stricken city of Jerusalem "humble and riding on . . . the foal of a donkey." The rider, says Zechariah, will cut off "the chariot from Ephraim and the war-horse from Jerusalem," and "will command peace to the nations," and his "dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth." By this means, the prophet goes on, the Lord God will "save" his "flock," those who once again are going to "shine on his land." Then, of this God, Zechariah declares: "For what goodness and beauty are his" (9:9, 10, 16, 17).

Centuries later, John the Evangelist described Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem along similar lines, even quoting from Zechariah. Jesus rode on a donkey, not the horse and chariot of a warlike king. Then Jesus spoke with some Greeks—to the Jews, outsiders—who wanted to see him. According to John, Jesus told them that "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified" (12:23, 24). Glory means radiance; it means compelling beauty. Jesus was on the verge, it seems, of his finest hour. He explained with the Parable of the Wheat Grain: a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies—and the death is a catalyst for life; new fruit, a new head of grain, grows up from what has fallen and died.

With this picture, Jesus conveyed the arresting paradox that illuminated his whole ministry: the road to a better world may run through the valley of the shadow of death. A voice from heaven, loud as thunder, assured him that he would indeed be "glorified," and Jesus declared that the "ruler of this world" was about to be "driven out." Then these stunning words, which plainly refer to death by crucifixion, exploded from his mouth: "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (John 12:31, 32).

Through John's whole description, Zechariah's poetry reverberates: recall again the nonviolent arrival of Jesus, not on a war-horse but on a donkey; the intimation of peace in Jesus' welcoming attitude to the Greeks; the suggestion of divine "goodness and beauty" in the reference to the Son's glorification at the hour of his crucifixion.

What comes through is that for God and the early Christians the cross was not only holy, it was also

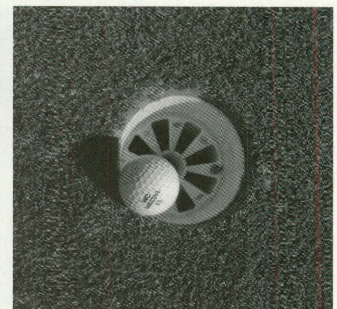
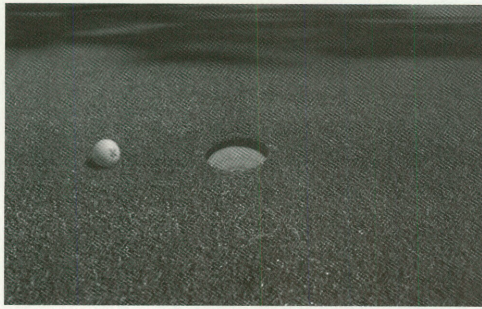


Photo: Tom Osborne

beautiful! It was somehow pleasing to the eye; it could somehow move the heart. It was a focal point—in fact, the focal point—for the beauty of holiness!

How can this be? What does it mean?

Fresh Exemplars

On August 4, 1968, a man in a business suit took lodging in a rooming house on Mulberry Street in Memphis. With his scope-sighted Remington 30.06 he was soon keeping watch over the second-floor balcony of the motel across the street, some 200 feet away. At 6:01 P.M. after the man he was looking for had come out of his room to breathe the outdoor air, the man with the gun squeezed the trigger, and his target fell to the balcony floor. Within an hour, he was dead.

The dead man was Martin Luther King Jr., the forceful, and then highly controversial, leader of the civil rights movement. He had a dream, forged on the anvil of Scripture, and it was that a divided people, drawn into renewal by “unearned suffering,” would one day sit down together at the “table of brotherhood.”⁴

The dream awakened hope and hate. Where there was hate, King tried, in the manner of Jesus, to strengthen hope through love. On the steps of his just-bombed home in Montgomery, Alabama, he told a mob that retaliation would never solve its problems, and he upheld the message of nonviolence enshrined in the Sermon on the Mount. Once he made his point this way: “We must love our enemies, because only by loving them can we know God and experience the beauty of his holiness.”⁵

Martin Luther King Jr., no perfect man, was still an amazing witness; his life, driven by his dream and capped by martyrdom, transformed attitudes in America. In his way, he embodied the beauty of holiness himself, and by moving human hearts, drew people into new understanding and new generosity toward one another. As Ellen White said in her comments on the Parable of the Wheat Grain, he “cast” his “life . . . into the furrow of the world’s need,”

and, in dying, brought forth much fruit.⁶

How can the cross exemplify the beauty of holiness? How, in words Paul wrote to the Corinthians, can the “light of the knowledge of the glory of God” shine forth “in the face of Jesus Christ”? (2 Cor. 4:6)

The point is that the cross is beautiful in the context of the life that leads up to it. The cross was Jesus’ finest hour because the cross proved how steadfast his love was, and how steadfast his courage was. These traits, and this proof of these traits, draws people to him, much as the sheer beauty of the non-violence associated with Martin Luther King drew America into new understanding.

Perhaps the Christian message, like any message about what ought to be believed and lived, requires the support of what James McClendon calls “fresh exemplars,” persons who today disclose anew the heart of that message and perhaps correct or enlarge it, persons who today reflect the beauty of holiness. Otherwise, the message and even the stories that undergird it may be consigned to irrelevance, to the “realm,” as McClendon further says, of “mere antiquarian lore.”⁷

Something Beautiful for God

If Martin Luther King is a reminder that witness is most persuasive when actual lives in actual communities please the eye and move the heart, so is Mother Teresa, that icon of Christian generosity who began her life in privilege. Born in 1910 to prosperous Albanian parents, she grew dissatisfied, and at seventeen became a nun, taking the name Teresa—she was Sister Teresa then—and setting her heart on missionary work in India. By the early 1930s, she had arrived in Calcutta to teach. After World War II, she, like Moses, heard the voice of God, and that voice sum-

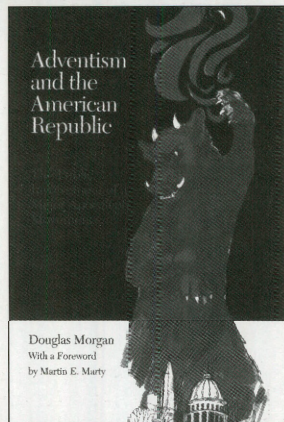


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moned her to leave her convent in order to live and work among the poorest of the poor. By 1950, after persistent and convoluted efforts to secure the support of Church authorities, she had founded the Order of the Missionaries of Charity. Soon she had begun, among other ministries, a home in Calcutta for the dying destitute.

By the 1960s, Mother Teresa was traveling the world to build support for her expanding order. A few years later, a British journalist who happened to be well known for his faithless hedonism agreed to interview her for a television program. Mother Teresa was already tiny; already her face was like a ball of crinkled paper. But the critics loved the interview, and so, it turned out, did the wider public. Malcolm Muggeridge, the journalist, remarked with prescience that her simplicity and truthfulness on TV had made her face "forever recognizable."⁸

When Muggeridge traveled to India to make a TV documentary about Mother Teresa, he found, among other things, that she wanted to pray with him before the filming. He knelt with her. Afterward he received a letter in which she said the project had "brought us all closer to God." She must have had him in mind, as well as her nuns and the other participants: in that letter she expressed hope that, in his own way, Muggeridge himself would "try to make the world conscious that it is never too late to do something beautiful for God."⁹

The phrase, "Something Beautiful for God", became the title for a book by Muggeridge. In time—quite a long time, actually—he did become a Christian. He was drawn into Christian faith by the beauty of holiness—by the sheer radiance of a tiny woman's generosity and sacrifice.

The Cross as Victory

Consider finally an exemplar from our own community of faith. In 1993, with Nelson Mandela out of jail and the first free and fair elections just around the corner in South Africa, Ginn Fourie, a Seventh-day Adventist, learned that her only daughter Lyndi was dead. A student at the University of Capetown, Lyndi had perished, along with three others, at the hands of gunmen from the Pan African Congress. The killing took place at a favorite student gathering spot. The assailants did not know their victims. At the funeral Ginn Fourie asked her pastor for permission to read a prayer she had composed—and she stunned everyone when her prayer quoted these words of Jesus: "Father forgive them for they do not know what they do."¹⁰

Later, circumstances threw this mother into the very presence of her daughter's killers, both at their trial and later at hearings conducted by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa. Both times, she expressed her forgiveness of the killers. Still later, she saw them in prison. There she urged them to take responsibility for what they had done and expressed her forgiveness once again.

Ginn Fourie's pastor, who now teaches at La Sierra University, remembers being "moved" and "touched" by her behavior. Some time later, the Medical Research Counsel of South Africa asked her to speak about all this at an international conference on mental health. She received a standing ovation. In the name of the crucified Christ, she had defied ordinary expectation, and her story had the power to fascinate, please, and, finally, move the human heart. She herself had embodied holiness, just as the New Testament writers envisioned that Jesus' followers would do. She herself had radiated the radiance of God. In her own way, she, like Martin Luther King and Mother Teresa, had helped to sanctify the world.

At her daughter's funeral, this woman's prayer had ended on a note of hope. "I trust you with my precious Lyndi," she had said, addressing Father and Son alike. "This planet is a dangerous place to live. I know that you will come back soon to fetch us."¹¹ What she had believed all along is that the cross was not the end of the story, nor was her own devastation.

When John the Evangelist suggests that Jesus' execution was his finest hour—the great focal point for the beauty of holiness—he cannot mean that the bruised and blood-stained body is, in itself, a source of delight and happiness. One reason he cannot mean this is that the cross is the capstone of a life, and it is Christ's love and courage, persisting to the end, that makes it a thing of beauty. But there is another reason, and it is what Ginn Fourie believed with all her heart: the cross is not a defeat, the cross is a victory.

This mother did something beautiful for God when she prayed, "Father forgive them for they do not know what they do." What made it beautiful, in addition to the sheer generosity that comes through, is that the Lord who first spoke these words is—alive: he has cast out the ruler of this world and set off a movement whose sheer generosity will defeat both oppression and death, and in the end wipe away every tear. God cares and acts even when it is dangerous to do so. To the believer's eye, the cross is the proof. Because God is God, the care and the action overcome the powers that have made the planet dangerous.

God, then, has done something beautiful for human beings, the beneficiaries of divine holiness. That is why, as Mother Teresa would say, it is never too late for human beings to do something beautiful for God. It is never too late for the beneficiaries to become benefactors, never too late for those who enjoy the radiance of holiness to transmit that radiance themselves, and thereby transform—thereby sanctify—the human prospect.

Notes and References

1. Rev. 21:2. Unless otherwise noted, biblical quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.
2. From "Pied Beauty."
3. The hymn is "O Worship the Lord." Compare Ps. 27:1, 2, in the King James Version.
4. These phrases both appear in the "I Have a Dream" speech, given at the Lincoln Memorial in Aug. 1963.
5. Quoted in L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995), 263 (italics mine).
6. Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Oakland, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1898), 88.
7. James William McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 1974), 37, 38.
8. Quoted in Anne Sebba, *Mother Teresa* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 84.
9. *Ibid.*
10. John Webster, "A Mother's Forgiveness," *Spectrum* 28 (spring 2000): 23-25.
11. *Ibid.*, 24.

Charles Scriven is president of Kettering College of Medical Arts.
Charles.Scriven@kmcnetwork.org

