

## In Paradox There Is Virtue



There are a number of old axioms that suggest that virtue and truth lie in the middle, between the two extremes. This was called the "golden mean" and expressed in phrases such as "In medio stat virtus" and "Aurea mediocritas".

But its meaning can easily be misunderstood and suggest that virtue and truth are found in the lowest common denominator, in mediocrity. Indeed that's the literal translation of aurea mediocritas, golden mediocrity.

What these axioms actually point to however is not some mediocrity that tries to avoid the raw edges of the two extremes by staking out some emaciated center. Rather they tell us that virtue and truth lie in paradox, in carrying the truth of both sides and living inside the tension of that ambiguity. Virtue and truth are not found by choosing "either/or" or in opting for some insipid middle that hasn't the salt to offend either side. Virtue and truth lie in living out "both/and", namely, in carrying and balancing out the truth that is contained in both extremes.

And nowhere is this truer than in religious discernment, that is, in the question of how we recognize God's voice in our lives. Does God speak in whispers or in thunder? Does God speak in pain or in blessing? Does God call us out of this world or more deeply into it? Does God call us through what is comfortable and familiar or does God call us into foreign lands? Does God disturb or soothe us? Is God recognized in miracles or in helplessness? Does God speak through the rich or through the poor, through the educated or the uneducated? Does God's voice frighten us or rid us of fear? Is God's voice heard more through piety or iconoclasm? Does God ask us to renounce the pleasures of this world or does God ask us to enjoy them

God's voice is in all of these things. It is heard in paradox:

- The voice of God is recognized both in whispers and soft tones, even as it is recognized in thunder and storm. God spoke to Elijah in a soft breeze, but to Pharaoh through the plagues.
- The voice of God is recognized wherever one sees life, joy, health, color, and humor, even as it is recognized wherever one sees dying, suffering, poverty, and a beaten-down spirit. God is equally

present on Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

- The voice of God is recognized in what calls us to what's higher, to what sets us apart, to what invites us to holiness, even as it calls us to humility, invites us to submerge our individuality into humanity, and rejects everything that denigrates our humanity. The voice of God calls us out of what's purely human even as it invites us to humbly take our place within humanity.
- The voice of God is recognized in what appears in our lives as "foreign", as other, as "stranger", even as it is recognized in the voice that is most deeply familiar and which beckons us home. God's voice takes us beyond any language we know even as we recognize in it most deeply our mother tongue.
- The voice of God is the one that most challenges us, even as it the only voice that ultimately soothes and comforts us. God's voice does disturb the comforted and comfort the disturbed, but it also comforts the comforted and disturbs the disturbed.
- The voice of God enters our lives as the greatest of all powers, even as it forever lies in vulnerability, like a helpless baby in the straw. God's voice creates the cosmos and keeps it in existence, even as it lies in our world powerless as an infant.
- The voice of God is heard in privileged way in the poor, even as it beckons us through the voice of the artist and the intellectual. God is in the poor, even as the artist and intellectual help reveal the transcendental properties of God.
- The voice of God invites us to live beyond all fear, even as it inspires holy fear. When God appears in human history, invariably the first words are: "Do not be afraid!" God's presence is meant to eradicate all fear, even as it invites us to live in "holy fear", in a reverence and chastity that help create a world within which no one needs to fear anything.
- The voice of is recognized inside the gifts of the Holy Spirit, even as it invites us never to deny the complexities of our world and our own lives.
- The voice of God is always heard wherever there is genuine enjoyment and gratitude, even as it asks us to deny ourselves, die to ourselves, and relativize all the things of this world.

Of course to accept this is also to accept living with ambiguity, complexity, unknowing, and a whole lot of patience. God's voice will then no longer be as clear as our fundamentalist instinct would like, but it will be free both to soothe and challenge us as never before.

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