

# ***The Theological Virtues***

*And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love. – 1Cor 13:13*

## **Faith**

### ***Meditations***

*What must I do to be saved?*

What must I do to be saved? Now there's a good old evangelical question. What must I do to be saved? Yet most of the time Jesus seems to answer the question strangely, ambiguously, leaving us in doubt about whether we need to be baptised, whether we need to believe that he rose from the dead, whether we need to speak his name. I wonder why? Oh well, never mind. At least he does, once, answer the question clearly. Matthew reports him unambiguously: not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of the pen will disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments will be called least in the Kingdom of Heaven, for I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees you will certainly not enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

So that's clear. What must I do to be saved? I must obey the Law. Completely. Well, that's no problem then: I don't have a prayer. I'm dead.

On the other hand... If that is the only answer, why bother telling us? If that is the only answer, why is Jesus so reluctant to give it? Why does he usually answer ambiguously, strangely? Is it, perhaps, because it answers the wrong question? Perhaps we shouldn't ask: What must I do to be saved? But instead: What must I be to be saved?

### ***A Cautionary Tale***

There is an old tale of a girl named Semele, who fell in love with a young man she met out on the hills. No problem – until one day they were snuggled together, making idle conversation – as you do – and she asked him where he lived.

"Ah, er, well," he replied, "actually, I don't live anywhere, not round here. You see, I'm a god. I just look like a man because I fancied you, and I thought, well..."

"Oh yeah," said Semele, "well, it makes a change from doctors and nurses. Which god are you going to be, then? I hope it's Dionysus; I could do with a drink."

"No, really," he said. "I really am a god. Zeus, in fact. But just forget it. I'd rather be a man in your arms than a God. But here's your drink." And he gave her a big cup which he couldn't possibly have had in his pocket without her noticing. And it was already full of wine, without him having to open a bottle or pour or anything.

Semele didn't say anything more, but she thought a lot. And worst of all, she spoke to her sister. And they worked out a Plan.

"If you're Zeus," she said, "if you're Zeus, you're married to Hera, aren't you?"

"Yep," he said, nibbling at her ear.

"So will you do something for me?"

"Anything," he murmured, nuzzling gently down to her jaw.

"Swear?" she said

"Sure." He was concentrating on her neck, now.

"By the Death River?"

"Of course!" Then he suddenly realised what he had said – no god can break an oath sworn by the river of Death – "now just a minute!"

Semele ignored him. "So let's have sex again, but this time use the shape that you use in bed with Hera!"

The young man protested, pleaded, begged, but Semele insisted. And the oath had been sworn.

After he had kept his oath, there was a little pile of ashes that had once been Semele. A wind blew them high into the air, and few little flakes of ash even landed on her sister's dress. She brushed them off.

## ***Prayers***

### ***For Faith***

I see the stars. Help me to trust in the arm that made them  
I see the trees. Help me to trust in the arm that sowed them  
I see the mountains. Help me to trust in the arm that raised them

I see the children. Help me to rest in the heart that welcomed them  
I see the guilty. Help me to rest in the heart that is one of them  
I see the dying. Help me to rest in the heart that died with them

I see the teachers. Help me to reach for the hand that guides them  
I see the healers. Help me to reach for the hand that helps them  
I see the lovers. Help me to reach for the hand that warms them

### ***For Deeper Faith***

Lord, when I walk under the stars, or through the mountains, or among the meadow flowers, I am lost in wonder at your power. Help me to be lost in wonder at that same power in the city underpasses, the public toilets, and among the discarded syringes behind the shops. I ask in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ the Crucified. Amen

### ***Trust***

Without you, Lord, who shall stand?  
Without you, Lord, who shall speak?  
Without you, Lord, who shall not be defeated?

Without you, Father, how should we be born?  
Without you, Father, how should we live?  
Without you, Father, how should we die?

Without you, Jesus, how should we understand?  
Without you, Jesus, how should we shine?  
Without you, Jesus, how should we conquer?

Without you, Spirit, how should we rejoice?  
Without you, Spirit, how should we trust?  
Without you, Spirit, how should we testify?

Without you, Lord, who shall stand?

## ***A Few More Thoughts on Faith***

Faith is another misunderstood virtue. For a start, faith is not belief. How could it be? We are saved by faith, not by works; yet belief is obviously a work of the mind.

Faith is not something you can choose to do; faith is something you've either got, or you haven't. Faith is attitude; Faith is trust; faith is commitment.

In truth, we are all committed to something, even if it's just ourselves and our own pleasure; we all have faith in something, even if it's our own extinction. Faith is a virtue when the object of faith, when who or what we are committed to can truly bear that commitment. Faith is a virtue, a means of power, when we have faith in a real power.

## Hope

### ***Meditations***

#### *Hope our Anchor*

The symbol of hope is traditionally an anchor, referring to Hebrews chapter 6 of course. I wonder exactly what it means? What does an anchor do? Well, it holds on, it gives safety in harbour – or even simply near the coast if the water is shallow enough. It provides a temporary mooring for a little ship, and a permanent one for a ship too big to dock.

That is rather a strange image, isn't it, for a Christian life? That our hope only works when we are safe in port, not when we are out on the high seas, out in the real world, out working and fighting for the Gospel! Can this be what the writer meant?

Well, there is such a thing as a sea anchor. You may remember that Paul saw a sea anchor in use when his ship hit a storm on the way to Rome. A sea anchor doesn't have flukes, and it isn't fixed to anything. It is a canvas sail – but a sail that is blown by the water, not the wind. You fix it to the stern of the ship by long ropes, and throw the canvas overboard, until it sinks, and fills with the current. You can then use it to control your ship, to swing her head round to the wind, and to steer. A sea anchor doesn't give you safety, like a harbour anchor; a sea anchor gives you steerage way. Control.

Is that the picture the Bible means? Hope not for when we are already safe in harbour, but to give us control when we are out on the high seas, reaching past the veiling surface deep into the ocean depths of the love of God to give us control in the teeth of the storm, to give us steerage way whatever the winds can throw at us, to give us the certainty of reaching port however black the clouds are ahead. That is a hope worth having.

#### *Where is our hope's anchor?*

*So we have a hope, do we?* An anchor in the stormy blast. An anchor that keeps the soul steadfast and sure while the billows roll. Do you have one? Are you sure you have? Can you see it?

Have you ever seen an anchor? Of course you have. In two sorts of places, in fact: first, embedded in concrete on a dockside or outside a pub as a sign, or as a useless relic of the old days; and second, carefully dismantled, stowed and greased in its proper place on deck during the voyage.

In fact, every anchor you can see is not being used. Can you see your anchor? Or are you using your anchor?

#### *By this Hope we are saved*

Theologians, especially amateur theologians, seem to argue endlessly about salvation by grace, salvation by faith, salvation by works. Nobody seems to take Paul seriously when he says 'by this hope we were saved' What hope is that, that is so powerful? It is the hope that all creation has, the pregnant creation, already feeling the contractions, the waters already burst – the water that Jesus came by – the birth already beginning. It is the hope that we have, of becoming – not just servants, but sons and daughters of God. It is the hope of redemption, of salvation, not just of our souls, but our bodies too – salvation to the uttermost.

This is a saving hope. For to hope for this is to accept that God can do it – that God can save us; but more, it is to accept that God will save us, that God loves us so much that he will save us unconditionally, not for what we are now, but for what he can make us into. If we hope in him, we believe in him, and whosoever believes in him will not perish, but shall have everlasting life.

## **Prayers**

### *For Sorrow*

Lord Jesus,  
You wept over Lazarus dead, but you at least knew he would live.  
I cannot weep, and I would die  
You wept in Gethsemane, but you at least had a purpose.  
I cannot weep, and I have no purpose  
You wept over Jerusalem but you at least knew there would be a new Jerusalem  
I cannot weep, and I see nothing new  
Free my tears, Lord,  
That they may renew me  
That they may give me purpose  
That they may offer me life  
That we may weep together,  
Lord Jesus.

### *For Hope*

Lord Jesus, who stilled the storm on the Sea of Galilee,  
Teach me to trust your power over the wind and seas  
Not only when the wind is fierce and the seas are high  
and my boat is being driven beyond my control  
But also when the wind is calm and the seas are dead  
and my boat is going nowhere.  
For you too wandered alone in the wilderness  
Amen

## **A Few More Thoughts on Hope**

Why is it that so many of these sections are spent saying what things are not? Hope is not hoping to goodness; hope is not taking a gamble because it will be all right in the end; hope is not believing against all experience.

Hope is sitting on a chair expecting it to hold your weight, because almost every other chair has held your weight. Hope is driving forward when the traffic lights turn green, because the road almost always has been clear when the lights turn green.

Hope is trusting your partner will be faithful even when you are separated, because he/she has always been faithful in the past, and you have faith in him/her.

Hope, in short, is what all science is built on, and what all working human relationships are built on. And hope is what all working spiritual relationships are built on.

## **Love**

### **Meditations**

#### *Silence*

Do you find it easy to talk about things that really matter? Some people do – they just have to talk about them. Some don't – I don't. I feel guilty sometimes. I get told by the more fervid evangelists that surely if I really loved Jesus I wouldn't be able to stop talking about Him – not so! They ask me, when I first fell in love with my wife to be, Could I keep that secret? Didn't I want to tell everyone I met what a wonderful girl she was, and how much I loved her? Well, yes I could keep it secret – very easily; and no I didn't want to tell everyone I met. Quite the opposite. It's not just people; it's true of places, as well. The places that I like, I talk about a lot. The places that really touch me, that I really love, those I never mention.

#### *Heart*

'You are nearer God's heart in a garden than anywhere else on earth' wrote the poet. I doubt it, myself. You'd think the Bible would mention it, for a start, and certainly the Garden of Eden doesn't

seem to have attracted much of God's attention – after all, he didn't find out about that little Unpleasantness with the apple until the evening. The New Testament suggests some quite different places: among the hungry, among the poor, in prison, on a sickbed, by a grave, those are the places where we are nearest God's heart – or at least, Jesus' heart; for 'inasmuch as ye do it to the least of these my little ones, ye do it unto me.' And one other place: the Garden of Gethsemane. Perhaps that garden is one place where we are truly near God's heart – though there was little enough of 'the kiss of the sun for pardon, the song of the birds for mirth' in there.

## ***Prayers***

### *Why?*

When the world was created, you laughed with joy  
When I was conceived, you memorised my name  
When I first came to you, you ran to embrace me  
When you took me to meet your Father, you spoke up for me  
Why? How can you find me worth such loving?  
And why don't I love you anything like as much?

### *For Deeper Love*

I see you, Jesus, and I do not see you  
I hear you, Jesus, and I do not hear you  
I touch you, Jesus, and I do not touch you  
I know you, Jesus, and I do not know you  
Open my eyes, open my ears, open my hands, open my heart.  
For I love you, Jesus, and I do not love you.

### *The Mirror*

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, who testified that whoever has seen you has seen the Father, fill us with your joy, your peace and your love, that whoever sees us may see the Son. For your name's sake. Amen.

## ***A Few More Thoughts on Love***

A meditation on love! How gross, how self-satisfied, how egregiously smug can I get!

The one thing I will say is this: never accept any restrictions on God's love. For example, you will find claims that John in his first letter is concerned only with love between Christians: no! God's love has no restrictions, and our love must have no restrictions.

## ***Some Final Thoughts***

At least these three are easier to find than the Cardinal Virtues. You probably knew of them – though you may know them as Faith Hope and Charity – even if you couldn't immediately find them in the Bible.

I would have loved to change their name. The phrase Theological Virtues makes them sound scholarly, pedantic; it conjures up a picture of bearded old nerds arguing endlessly over how many angels can dance on the point of a pin. But since the cardinal virtues are the means of power on which our Christian worldly lives turn, from which they depend as a door depends on and from its hinges, so these are the means of power on which our Christian spiritual lives turn. As through the cardinal virtues we build each other up, so through the theological virtues God builds us up.