

## The Testimony of Beauty

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Instruction in morality all too often repels the hearer; the display of beauty attracts the beholder. That at least is so for me! I have learnt most from people, and in the best way, by the beauty of their behavior.

Over the last decade I have experienced a paradigm shift in my reading of the Pastoral Epistles and my understanding of what seems at first glance to be fussy moralistic instruction. That shift has meant that I have had to unlearn some things that have been part and parcel of my inherited intellectual, cultural baggage and learn to see old things in a new light with new eyes. One dimension of that mental, spiritual rearrangement has been to rediscover the close connection between goodness and beauty and to abandon their categorical separation which stems from the Enlightenment. It was not an entirely new discovery, because, intuitively and unconsciously, I have always, from my childhood, felt that they belonged together.

That rediscovery was triggered and confirmed by the recognition that the Greek adjective *kalós*, like the Hebrew word *tōb* in the Old Testament, is used in the New Testament both for what is good and what is beautiful. In fact, as far as we can gather, it basically describes something beautiful and visually attractive. But its full sense is much broader than that. It does not just describe what is physically attractive and morally good but also what is mentally illuminating and spiritually good.

The teaching about the beauty of goodness in the Bible shows that even though beauty is often hidden from undiscerning sight, it does not, as is now commonly held, lie in the eye of the beholder, but is inherent in what is beheld. The Biblical foundation for that at present rather contentious insight is provided by the account of God's creation of a well-ordered universe in Genesis 1. There we learn that God not only sees that the main parts of the earth are beautiful and good (1: 4, 12, 18, 21, 25) but also sees that the whole of His creation is very beautiful and good (1:31). The created world reflects God's own goodness and beauty (Ps 19:1).

Thus when Paul says in 1 Timothy 4:4 that everything created by God is good, he implies that each part of it is beautiful in itself and its own way, even after the fall into sin. That includes sexual intercourse in marriage and our enjoyment of the food that we eat.

That insight into the beauty of the created world as God's handiwork takes a surprising turn in the New Testament. In some places *kalos* is used to describe something physically beautiful, such as the stones of the temple in Luke 21:5 and the pearls that a merchant seeks to acquire in Matthew 13:45. But in Matthew 26:10 and Mark 14:6 Jesus describes the act of the woman who anointed his head with costly perfume as "a beautiful thing". He does not praise her for her attractive appearance but for the deed that manifests something beautiful about him and his impending death as well about her and her devotion to him.

The display of beauty in the actions of Christ's disciples is explored at some length in the New Testament. Their deeds are theophanic. Just as the deeds of Jesus in his earthly ministry revealed the hidden glory of His heavenly Father, so their deeds reveal His presence in them and activity through them. They show that what they do is been done through God (Jn 3:21). Their good works are beautiful because they are God's works. Thus in Matthew 5:16 Jesus tells his disciples to let their light shine before others though their "beautiful works", the light that they have from him as God's children, so that those who see them will get a glimpse of God's glory from them and glorify their heavenly Father. The beauty of their works reveals God's hidden beauty modestly in ordinary human terms. In Ephesians 2:4-10 St. Paul tells us that Christians are God's "works of art" that He uses to show His grace; they are people created in Christ Jesus for the good works that God has prepared for them to do as they live and work with Him on earth. They do not do this by themselves or their own power, but together with Jesus as they are led by the Holy Spirit. Their good works manifest the glory of God in a humble, winsome, human way.

By the good works that Christians do in God's service they display the glory of the triune God in and through their earthly bodies. They are His shrines where He resides (1 Cor 6:19). They glorify Him in their bodies by all that they do (1 Cor 6:20; 10:31). Since Christ is in them and they are in him, they do holy, heavenly work on earth. That is what they have been created

and called to do. Jesus has redeemed and purified them for himself so that they may be eager to do what is “beautiful” (Tit 2:14). Those who belong to Christ want do what is “beautiful”, even though they all too often fail at it and depend on Christ to do it (Rom 7:18). They, therefore, are urged to do what is what is beautiful and good with each other and all people (Tit 3:8; Rom 12:17; 2 Cor 13:7; Gal 6:9, 10); they are encouraged to do “beautiful works”, works that are attractive because they are good in every way (1 Tim 5:10; 6:18; Tit 2:7; 3:8, 14; Heb 10:24; 1 Pet 2:12). The beautiful deeds of those who belong to Christ, their deeds of love, are meant to “provoke” their fellow members in the church to copy them and even outdo them (Heb 10:24). By their “beautiful conduct” they show that they are truly wise people who possess heavenly wisdom (James 3:13). Such conduct contradicts the slanderous gossip of unbelievers who will eventually have to acknowledge that their “beautiful deeds” come from God and reflect His glory (1 Pet 2:12).

Today, as I write this, is St. Monica’s Day. She was the mother of St. Augustine. In his autobiographical Confessions he speaks rather memorably about how she won her philandering, pagan husband by speaking to him of Jesus by her virtues through which Jesus made her beautiful. He adds that she was highly respected and loved by all her fellow servants of Christ because they felt His presence in her. His presence in her heart was attested by the fruits of her holy life, “the testimony of good works” to him as her Lord (1 Tim 5:10). By her beautiful works she put the beauty of his holiness on display for all to see and admire. So too do we and all God’s children!

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