

'IN NO STRANGE LAND'

And being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God should come, he answered them and said: The kingdom of God cometh not with observation. Neither shall they say: Behold it is here, or behold it is there. For lo, the kingdom of God is within you.

Luke 17: 20-21

The English poet Francis Thompson (1859-1907) wrote a poem called 'The Kingdom of God'. I have adopted its subtitle as the title of this piece. Thompson was a Catholic and, despite his shiftless existence and an addiction to opium, a mystic. The whole burden of 'The Kingdom of God' is that Christ (and His kingdom) is present here and now in our midst. Han Suyin wrote a novel about love which borrowed for its title the phrase 'a many-splendoured thing' but Thompson was not referring to love. He was referring to the means of achievement of its perfection; to that thing in which God makes Himself present among men.

O world invisible, we view thee,
O world intangible, we touch thee,
O world unknowable, we know thee,
Inapprehensible, we clutch thee!

Does the fish soar to find the ocean,
The eagle plunge to find the air—
That we ask of the stars in motion
If they have rumour of thee there?

Not where the wheeling systems darken,
And our benumbed conceiving soars!—
The drift of pinions, would we hearken,
Beats at our own clay-shuttered doors.

The angels keep their ancient places;—
Turn but a stone, and start a wing!
'Tis ye, 'tis your estrangèd faces,
That miss the many-splendoured thing.

But (when so sad thou canst not sadder)
Cry;—and upon thy so sore loss
Shall shine the traffic of Jacob's ladder
Pitched betwixt Heaven and Charing Cross.

Yea, in the night, my Soul, my daughter,
Cry,—clinging Heaven by the hems;
And lo, Christ walking on the water
Not of Gennesareth, but Thames!

Chesterton wrote of Thompson:

"Great poets are obscure for two opposite reasons; now, because they are talking about something too large for anyone to understand, and now again because they are talking about something too small for anyone to see... [T]here was one poem of which the image was so vast that it was literally difficult for a time to take it in; he was describing the evening earth with its

mist and fume and fragrance, and represented the whole as rolling upwards like a smoke; then suddenly he called the whole ball of the earth a thurible, and said that some gigantic spirit swung it slowly before God. That is... the image too large for comprehension. Another instance sticks in my mind of the image which is too small. In one of his poems, he says that [the] abyss between the known and unknown is bridged by 'Pontifical death'. There are about ten historical and theological puns in that one word. That a priest means a pontiff, that a pontiff means a bridge-maker, that death is certainly a bridge, that death may turn out after all to be a reconciling priest, that at least priests and bridges both attest to the fact that one thing can get separated from another thing—these ideas and twenty more, are all actually concentrated in the word 'pontifical'. In Francis Thompson's poetry, as in the poetry of the universe, you can work infinitely out and out, but yet infinitely in and in. These two infinities are the mark of greatness; and he was a great poet." ('The Dead Poet', *All Things Considered*, London, 1908)

The *thing* to which Thompson was referring is at once too large for anyone to understand and too small for anyone to see: larger than the universe (in its awful immensity) for it stands for the Creator and *comprehensor* of the universe; too small for anyone to see because invisible, the kingdom of God in our midst.

Thompson's 'Cry!' repeated invokes the profound insight of Léon Bloy—

*Il n'y a qu'une tristesse, c'est de n'être pas des saints.*¹

Michael Baker

March 19, 2020—*St Joseph*

¹ This is difficult to translate well; my best attempt—*There is but one sorrow, that of not being of the company of the saints.*