

The Baptized Imagination: Kissing the Earth with Scripture

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As a general rule, people, even the wicked, are much more naïve and simple-hearted than we suppose. And we ourselves are too.

Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*

In his autobiography C.S. Lewis speaks of the “baptized imagination.” Indeed, he insists his own imagination was baptized into the faith before any other part of him was, and he implies that our imaginations play a larger role in our affirmations and loyalties than we often admit. It is our sense of beauty that needs to be converted, he thinks, as much as, if not more than, our moral or intellectual lives. What baptized Lewis’ imagination was a book by George MacDonald entitled *Phantastes, a faerie Romance*, which he purchased to have something to read on a train.

The quality which had enchanted me in his (i.e., MacDonald’s) imaginative works turned out to be the quality of the real universe, the divine, magical, terrifying and ecstatic reality in which we all live. I should have been shocked in my teens if anyone had told me that what I learned to love in *Phantastes* was goodness. But now that I know, I see there was no deception. The deception is all the other way round – in that prosaic moralism which confines goodness to the region of Law and Duty, which never lets us feel in our face the sweet air blowing from ‘the land of righteousness’....”¹

How are we to recover a Christian reading of scripture? What is it that enables the church to be the place where the text of scripture is authoritatively “performed,”² that is, where the plot of the narrative itself is not only acknowledged and received but also rehearsed and delighted in? I want to suggest that the recovery of a Christian reading of scripture will occur not as the result of various projects, scholarly or pastoral, but, rather, through scripture’s own power to baptize the church’s imagination, releasing that “sweet air blowing from the land of righteousness” that enables us to embrace the world in all its earthiness and imperfection for Jesus’ sake. Lewis, in recounting the effect of MacDonald’s stories on him, speaks of a kind of holiness pervading this imaginative world, a holiness which, unlike that Romanticism which is all too eager to flee the mundane and particular in order to find a more spiritual truth, discovers instead in the smallest particular, in a grain of seed, for example, the presence of the Kingdom. “But now I saw the bright shadow coming out of the book into the real world and resting there, transforming all common things and yet itself unchanged. Or, more accurately, I saw the common things drawn into the bright shadow.”³

What makes a Christian reading of scripture difficult today is not a failure of Christian scholarship or even of ecclesiastical initiative, but, rather, a failure of the heart, a kind of *accidie* or sloth which has clouded the church’s imagination and

threatened us with that terrible form of despair that is bored with what is good, and weary with what is beautiful, and indifferent to what is true. What is needed to combat this all-too-comfortable despair is not a list of things to do but, rather, a converted imagination that has discovered how odd and sneaky God is (“like a thief in the night”), how subversive to our own agendas is his story, how happily and wonderfully self-forgetting are his gifts. However, such a converted imagination is not something we can just conjure up, any more than we can re-invent ourselves. Rather, it is a gift for which we must pray. Still, what has mediated such a gift and sustained the life of the faithful for centuries is near at hand, even on our lips and in our hearts. Scripture itself brings us that gift in the strange story it tells, in the way in which it plants the seed of faith through its own particular narration. Just so does this story overcome our own hopelessness and despair, subverting our cultivated weariness and even brilliant “explanations,” while offering instead its simple gift of life to folk who are caught up in a “culture of death.”⁴

To illustrate the way in which scripture converts our imaginations and invites us to a reading of its narrative as a means of grace (as opposed simply to an historical-critical puzzle to be solved), I would like to examine Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*. To read this novel is to meet several characters who are struggling with, and often against, the reality which scripture’s story depicts. They find in the gospel both a threat to their nihilistic schemes of self-invention (Ivan) and, at the same time, the one weapon powerful enough to offer them hope in the face of despair (Alyosha, Dmitri). Strangely, it is scripture’s story that drives them to a deeper love for this world, indeed, for all of God’s creation, enabling them to embrace even that misery and suffering they might otherwise have only held in contempt.

In many ways, the text for this novel might well be that passage from John 12:24, a text cited more than once in the course of its narrative: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” Father Zossima, the mentor and spiritual father of Alyosha Karamazov and one of the chief characters in the first half of the novel, cites this text often, clearly viewing his own life in its light. It is also the text, however, which Father Zossima believes accompanies and redeems the Karamazov family, foretelling both the suffering all the brothers will undergo as well the painful redemption that will bring them to Easter’s joy and light. When asked in another context whether such words can have been written by men, Father Zossima replies, “The Holy Spirit wrote them.”⁵ What enables him to be so confident in his reply is not his adherence to some doctrine of plenary inspiration but his conviction that scripture’s story comes, in fact, from God and just so, tells the true story of this world, the story of God’s redemptive love for sinners. Such a love is indeed full of suffering, he thinks, because it graciously resists our selfish conceits and burns away our even more selfish virtues in revealing its strange gifts in the cross of Jesus Christ. That is how are we set free for God or, to put it another way, that is how we encounter true reality, an encounter which “sanctifies” us, however much it hurts, so that we are gradually made like scripture itself, holy, able to become witnesses, able to tell the truth of God’s intrusively happy grace.

Scripture captures our imagination through its power to evoke both our memory and our hope. Like the Deuteronomist, Dostoyevsky clearly believes that memory is the way we characteristically learn to hope,⁶ and that hope is what sustains us in the midst of despair. Part of the greatness of the novel consists in Dostoyevsky’s refusal

to reduce the mystery of human life to some ideological or scientific or homiletical explanation. Neither Father Zossima nor Alyosha “preaches,” that is, they do not offer schemes for the improvement of humankind. The only character who ventures in this direction is Alyosha’s brother, Ivan, whose attempt to live without God leads, ultimately, to the murder of his father, the suicide of his half-brother, and to his own madness. “Hell,” Father Zossima insists, “is the suffering of being unable to love,”⁷ a suffering with which all the characters are well-acquainted, but which Ivan knows most deeply of all.

Dostoyevsky creates characters who are haunted by their memories and sufferings, but who are also sustained by the way in which memory of scripture’s story can mysteriously yield them hope. It is not at all uncommon to find in the pages of the novel sentiments which Alyosha voices at its very end. He is speaking on the occasion of the death of a young boy named Ilusha, saying a final word about this death to a group of young boys whom he has befriended and who have become his disciples:

You must know that there is nothing higher and stronger and more wholesome and good for life in the future than some good memory, especially a memory of childhood, of home. People talk to you a great deal about your education, but some good sacred memory, preserved from childhood, is perhaps the best education. If a man carries many such memories with him into life, he is safe to the end of his days. And if one has only one good memory left in one’s heart, even that may sometimes be the means of saving him.⁸

Memory forms us, and the memory scripture evokes forms us in such a way that we are given a “past.” Indeed, the Sacrament of Baptism implies, at least in part, that we are freed from the terrible burden of having to invent ourselves. We are not bubbles floating on the sea of desires and longings but are rooted, rather, in a story that begins with Abraham and whose center is the cross and whose destiny is eternal life. It is this story that encompasses the Karamazov family and intrudes upon their little village again and again. Father Zossima understands scripture’s story in just this way, seeing his own life and imagination being shaped by its words:

With my memories of home I count, too, my memories of the Bible, which, child as I was, I was very eager to read. I also had a book of Scripture history with excellent pictures called, *A Hundred and Four Stories from the Old and New Testament*, and I learned to read from it. I have it lying on my shelf now, I keep it as a precious relic of the past.

I remember first being moved to devotional feeling at eight years of age. My mother took me alone to mass...on the Monday before Easter. It was a fine day, and I remember today, as though I saw it now, how the incense rose from the censer and softly floated upwards and, overhead in the cupola, mingled in rising waves with the sunlight that streamed in at the little window. I was stirred by the sight and for the first time in my life I consciously received the seed of God’s word in my heart. A youth came out into the middle of the church carrying a big book, so large that at the time I felt he could scarcely carry it. He laid it on the reading desk, opened it, and

began reading, and suddenly I understood something read in the church of God.⁹

Father Zossima relates that what was read was the opening chapters of the book of Job, the story of how there was a man in the land of Uz who was righteous and God-fearing and very wealthy. And how God loved him and boasted of his faithfulness to Satan and how Satan laughed at such words, ridiculing Job's faith as being entirely self-serving, and how God gave up his beloved servant to Satan's wrath, and how Job lost everything but did not curse God.

Fathers and teachers, forgive my tears, for all my childhood rises up again before me. I breathe now as I breathed then, with the breast of a little child of eight, and I feel as I did then, awe and wonder and gladness. The camels caught my imagination, and Satan, who talked like that with God, and God who gave His servant up to destruction, and His servant crying out: "Blessed be Thy name although Thou dost punish me." All these things caught my imagination as well as the soft and sweet singing in the church: "Let my prayer rise up before Thee," and the incense from the priest's censer and the kneeling and the prayer. Ever since then – only yesterday I took it up – I have never been able to read that sacred tale without tears. And how much that is great, mysterious and unfathomable there is in it! . . . What a book the Bible is, what a miracle, what strength is given with it to man! It is like a mold cast of the world and man and human nature. Everything is there, and a law for everything for all the ages. And what mysteries are solved and revealed: God raises Job again, gives him wealth again. Many years pass by and he has other children and loves them. But how could he love those new ones when those first children are no more, when he has lost them? Remembering them, how could he be fully happy with those new ones, however dear the new ones might be? But he could, he could. It's the great mystery of human life that grief passes gradually into quiet tender joy . . . I bless the rising sun each day, and as before, my heart sings to meet it. But now I love even more its setting, its long slanting rays and the soft tender gentle memories that come with them, the dear images from the whole of my long happy life – and over all the Divine Truth, softening, reconciling, forgiving! My life is ending. I know that well. But every day that is left me I feel how my earthly life is in touch with a new infinite, unknown, but approaching life, the nearness of which sets my soul quivering with rapture, my mind glowing and my heart weeping with joy.¹⁰

What a book the Bible is! "It is like a mold cast of the world and man and human nature." Father Zossima testifies to the power of the narrative itself to draw us into its own story and bring us before the presence of God, not so much dispelling the mysteries of life, but revealing the mystery that is at the heart of life, the mystery of grace, the mystery of being loved by One who "did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all."

What saves Father Zossima's faith in the Bible's narrative from being merely biblicistic or even bibliolatrous is that the story he hears in the Bible leads him not to

the worship of the book or its various texts but to the worshipping community. It is there, in the church's own life and liturgy, that his imagination is baptized and he hears the story of the redemption wrought in Jesus Christ. There, "in Christ," he is able to perceive God's love for this broken world. In this respect, the Bible helps him *see*. It becomes a "living word," probing to the depths of human suffering and revealing in the cross how God embraces and redeems all of creation. So do we begin to see in its story what we would otherwise have overlooked. Father Zossima's is the epistemology of the cross. It is the cross that helps us know the world, to see it in all of its mystery and suffering, and in all of its love and even beauty. At one point he notes: "Brothers, love is a teacher; but one must know how to acquire it, for it is hard to acquire, it is dearly bought, it is won slowly by long labor."¹¹

It is the Gospel of God's suffering and redemptive love to which Father Zossima clings, and it is that Gospel which enables him to move so confidently into a world full of misery and anger and deep despair, knowing that just there the cross of Jesus Christ belongs and is already at work redeeming such misery by its grace. That is why Father Zossima does not hate the world or think that following Jesus Christ commits one to a "tragic sense of life." He tells his fellow monks,

My friends, pray to God for gladness. Be glad as children, as birds of heaven. And let not the sin of men confound you in your doings... Do not say: 'Sin is mighty, wickedness is mighty, evil environment is mighty, and we are lonely and helpless. Evil environment is wearing us away and hindering our good work from being done.' Fly from that dejection.... On earth, indeed, we are as it were astray, and if it were not for the precious image of Christ before us, we should be undone and altogether lost.... Much on earth is hidden from us, but to make up for that we have been given a precious mystic sense of our living bond with the other world....¹²

Again, early on in the novel he tells a troubled soul:

There is no sin, and there can be no sin on all the earth, which the Lord will not forgive to the truly repentant. Man cannot commit a sin so great as to exhaust the infinite love of God.... If you are penitent, you love. And if you love you are of God.... Love is such a priceless treasure that you can redeem the whole world by it, and cleanse not only your own sins but the sins of others.¹³

How might one recover a Christian reading of scripture? We could do worse than to listen to Father Zossima's own sermon on the matter, a sermon in which he invites the priests and monks gathered around him to discover how an ecclesial reading of scripture regularly baptizes the imagination:

Friends and teachers, I have heard more than once, and of late one may hear it more often, that the priests, and above all the village priests, are complaining on all sides of their miserable income and their humiliating lot. They plainly state even in print – I've read it myself – that they are unable to teach the Scriptures to the people because of the smallness of their means,

and if Lutherans(!) and heretics come and lead the flock astray, they let them because they have so little to live on. May the Lord increase the sustenance that is so precious to them, for their complaint is just too. But of a truth I say, if anyone is to blame in the matter, half the fault is ours.

The priest may be short of time, he may say truly that he is overwhelmed with work and services, but still he must surely have an hour a week to remember God. He does not work the whole year round. Let him gather around him once a week, some hour in the evening, if only the children at first – the fathers will hear of it and they too will begin to come. There's no need to build halls for this, let him take them into his cottage. They won't spoil his cottage, they will only be there one hour. Let him open that book and begin reading it without grand words or superciliousness, without condescension, but gently and kindly, being glad that he is reading to them, and they are listening with attention. Let him read loving the words himself, and only stopping from time to time to explain words that are not understood by the peasants. Don't be anxious, they will understand everything. The faithful heart will understand all!

Let the priest read to them about Abraham and Sarah, about Isaac and Rebecca, of how Jacob went to Laban and wrestled with the Lord in his dream and said: "This place is holy" – and he will impress the devout mind of the peasant. Let him read, especially to the children, how the brothers sold Joseph, the tender boy, the dreamer and the prophet, into bondage, and told their father that a wild beast had devoured him, and showed him the blood-stained clothes. Let him read to them how the brothers afterwards journey into Egypt for corn and how Joseph, now a great ruler, unrecognized by them, tormented them, accused them, kept his brother Benjamin and all through love.... Let the priest read to them further how happy old Jacob was on learning that his boy was still alive, and how he went to Egypt leaving his own country. Let him read to them how Jacob died in a foreign land, bequeathing the great prophecy that had lain mysteriously hidden in his meek and timid heart, that from his offspring, from Judah, would come the great hope of the world, the Messiah and Savior.

Fathers and teachers, forgive me and don't be angry. Like a little child I've been babbling of what you know long ago, and can teach me a hundred times more skillfully. I only speak from rapture. And forgive my tears, for I love the Bible.... Only a tiny seed is needed – drop it into the heart of the peasant and it won't die. It will live in his soul all his life. It will be hidden in the midst of his darkness and sin, like a bright spot, like a great reminder. And there's no need of much teaching or explanation, he will understand it all simply. Do you believe that peasants don't understand? Try reading to them the touching story of the fair Esther and the haughty Vashti; or the miraculous story of Jonah and the whale. Don't forget the parables of Our Lord, choose especially from the Gospel of St. Luke and then from the Acts of the Apostles the conversion of St. Paul... and from the Lives of the Saints, for instance, the life of Alexey, the man of God and, greatest of all, the happy martyr and seer of God, Mary of Egypt – and you will penetrate their hearts with these simple tales. Give one hour a week to it in spite of

your poverty, only one short hour. And you will see for yourself that our people are gracious and grateful, and will repay you a hundredfold.... One who does not believe in God will not believe in God's people. He who believes in God's people will see God's holiness too, even though he has not believed in it until then.... And what is the use of Christ's words, unless we set an example? The people are lost without the word of God, for their souls thirst for the Word, and for all that is good.¹⁴

"One who does not believe in God will not believe in God's people." This, of course, is Ivan's problem, just as it is, in a way, the problem of all non-ecclesial readings of scripture. A Christian reading of scripture can only find its true end in the establishment of God's people and in the love that nurtures those people into a household of faith. That is why it can only truly render the content of its story in the context of its own "belief in God's people." And such "belief in God's people" is not pious optimism in the goodness of human beings generally or of Christians in particular but the logical implication of believing in the God revealed in scripture, the God of Israel and Jesus Christ. It is that God who compels us to reckon with "belief in God's people" as the first implication of the Gospel's own story. If we miss that, we have missed the story itself. The gospel leads us not away from the church but to the church.

But Father Zossima adds, "He who believes in God's people will see God's holiness too, even though he has not believed in it till then." There are passages in *The Brothers Karamazov* that testify to Dostoyevsky's faith in something like "Mother Russia," or the enduring spiritual strength of the peasants, or even the holiness of the Russian soil. The sentence just quoted is followed by another that reads: "Only the people and their spiritual power will convert our atheists, who have torn themselves away from their native soil."¹⁵ One might conclude that what is being voiced here is nothing more than a kind of pan-Slavic nationalism in the guise of Orthodox faith. And that is one possible interpretation.

However, what prevents one from simply accepting this interpretation is Father Zossima's insistence that "holiness" is never an abstraction but is always embodied in the life of the believing community. In leading us to the community of faith, scripture sanctifies us, makes us holy. And to become holy is not to be transformed into some morally pure state, but, rather, it is to love the earth for Jesus' sake, to kiss it with our tears, to embrace the earthiness of our own creaturely ways as the very vessels through which God has chosen to bless this world. The Word did, after all, become flesh. So to believe in God is always to believe in God's people, discovering in the fleshliness of their own suffering the holiness of the God who assumed such flesh so that we might participate in his divine life. Again and again, Father Zossima advocates taking responsibility for the whole world. By that, he does not mean what Liberal Protestantism often has advocated, namely, that we cultivate a sense of guilt for the mismanagement of the world's affairs. No. When he says things like, "every one is really responsible to all men for all men and for everything,"¹⁶ or "Make yourself responsible for all men's sins,"¹⁷ he is inviting believers to enter into "that semblance of Divine Love" that is "the highest love on earth."¹⁸ In short, he is inviting believers to follow Jesus Christ, finding in the humiliation of the cross not only the most direct way of entering into another's suffering heart, but also the truth that sets one free to love, to

forget self and love this world in all of its brokenness. Just so do we participate most fully in the life of God, learning to kiss God's earth with our tears, and, indeed, with scripture's own message.

The best illustration of this is the crisis in Alyosha's own life, a crisis described in the chapter entitled "Cana of Galilee." Father Zossima has died, and, worse, his corpse has not proven "incorruptible" as the bodies of dead saints were thought to be. Rather, he stinks. His death is all too real and all too humiliatingly human. Alyosha, his disciple and friend, has his faith shaken by this embarrassing event. And when it becomes painfully clear that "he stinketh," Alyosha flees the monastery without even asking for a blessing. Late that night, however, he returns. As he opens the door, there is no one in the cell but an old monk reading the gospel lesson over the coffin of the dead elder. The window of the cell is open to let in the air and dissipate the smell. Alyosha bends to pray but his prayers are interrupted by the old monk's reading of the gospel lesson:

"And when they wanted wine, the mother of Jesus saith unto him; 'They have no wine....'"

Ah, yes, I was missing that, and I didn't want to miss it, I love that passage: it's Cana of Galilee, the first miracle.... Ah, that miracle! Ah, that sweet miracle! It was not men's grief, but their joy Christ visited. He worked His first miracle to help men's gladness.... "He who loves men loves their gladness too...." Dmitri was always repeating that, it was one of his leading ideas.... "There's no living without joy," Dmitri says....

"Jesus saith unto her, 'Woman, what has it to do with thee? Mine hour is not yet come.'

"His mother saith unto the servants: 'Whatsoever he saith unto you, do it.'

Do it... Gladness, the gladness of some poor, very poor, people... Of course they were poor, since they hadn't wine enough even at the wedding.... His mother knew that His heart was open even to the simple, artless merry-making of some obscure and unlearned people, who had warmly bidden Him to their poor wedding.... And indeed was it to make wine abundant at poor weddings that he had come down to earth?¹⁹

Alyosha has a vision of his teacher telling him of the great banquet. "We are drinking the new wine, the wine of new, great gladness. Do you see how many guests are tasting the new wine?.... Do you see our Son, do you see him?" Father Zossima continues:

Do not fear him. He is terrible in His greatness, awful in His sublimity, but infinitely merciful. He has made Himself like unto us from love and rejoices with us. He is changing the water into wine that the gladness of the guests may not be cut short. He is expecting new guests, He is calling new ones unceasingly forever and ever.... There they are bringing new wine. Do you see they are bringing the vessels?²⁰

Alyosha wakes from the dream with tears in his eyes, tears of happiness and joy.

These words of scripture have invited him to see what he had not seen before, the love of God for this world. These words and this Lord have captured his heart.

He did not stop on the steps either, but went quickly down; his soul, overflowing with rapture, yearned for freedom, space, openness. The vault of heaven, full of soft, shining stars, stretched vast and fathomless above him. The Milky Way ran in two pale streams from the zenith to the horizon. The fresh, motionless, still night enfolded the earth. The white towers and golden domes of the church gleamed out against the sapphire sky. The autumn flowers, in the garden, were slumbering. The silence of the earth seemed to melt into the silence of the heavens. The mystery of earth was one with the mystery of the stars.

Alyosha stood, gazed out before him and then suddenly threw himself down on the earth. He did not know why he embraced it. He could never have told why he longed so irresistibly to kiss it, to kiss it. But he kissed it weeping and watering it with his tears, and vowed passionately to love it, to love it forever and ever. "Water the earth with the tears of your joy and love those tears." His elder's words echoed in his soul...

Why was he weeping?

Oh! In his rapture he was weeping even over those stars, which were shining to him from the abyss of space, and "he was not ashamed of that ecstasy." ... He longed to forgive everyone and for everything, and to beg forgiveness. Oh, not for himself, but for all men, for all and for everything. ... But with every instant he felt clearly and, as it were, tangibly, that something firm and unshakable as that vault of heaven had entered into his soul. ... He had fallen on the earth a weak soul, but he rose up in strength. ... "Someone visited my soul in that hour," he used to say afterward with implicit faith. Within three days he left the monastery in accordance with the words of the elder, who had bidden him to "go forth into the world."²¹

What has happened? What has happened is that Alyosha has heard the word of God and heard it not as some moral injunction or political strategy or interesting story from the ancient Near East. Rather, his imagination has been captured by this word, and he has received it now as a gift of joy against a dark and despairing world, as the gift of life amidst a "culture of death," as a way of participating in Christ himself, entering into his love and joy for a broken and beaten down world. Scripture's story has led Alyosha to kiss this world with his tears. That is the only answer that Alyosha can ever give to Ivan's all too accurate and despairing portrayal of what suffering looks like in a God-forsaken world. Yet, Alyosha's "answer" of a scripture-induced kiss is not the romantic defiance thrown in the face of a harsh and dark reality. Rather, it is an entirely happy answer, one that has discovered surprisingly good and abundant wine in the midst of the poorest of the poor. There is, Alyosha thinks, a secret that the wise and knowing do not know, a reason to be happy and rejoice, and it has to do with scripture's story of turning water into wine, of raising the dead, of rejoicing in the gladness of God's people. That secret is Jesus Christ, whom the wise often miss and whom babes proclaim. His story has always been embarrassing to a culture in love with its own explanations and self-inventions, just as it has regularly embarrassed

those who would make him merely useful or turn him into someone who is simply “good for us.” What Alyosha discovers in scripture’s story is not scripture’s power to make us virtuous but scripture’s power to give us hope, even to give us joy. It raises us from the dead. “He had fallen on the earth a weak soul, but he rose up in strength....”

The novel ends with a funeral speech. A young boy whom Alyosha has befriended and reconciled to his classmates, has died after a long illness. The boys (twelve of them!) gather around their master for this final memorial word. And it turns out to be a happy word of Easter hope. He has already enjoined the boys to hold on to “some good memory, especially a memory of childhood.” The boys are convinced that what he says is true. They “too wanted to say something, but they restrained themselves.”²² Alyosha invites them to remember their friend, Ilusha, the boy who died. “Let us never forget him. May his memory live forever in our hearts.” And the boys reply enthusiastically, “Yes, yes, forever, forever!”²³ Suddenly, one of the boys, the leader whose name is Kolya, turns to Alyosha and asks, “Can it be true as they teach us in church, that we shall all rise again from the dead and shall live and see each other again, all, Ilusha, too?” Alyosha replies in the most wonderful simplicity of faith, “Certainly we shall all rise again, certainly we shall see each other and shall tell each other with joy and gladness all that has happened!” Kolya responds, “Oh, how wonderful it will be!” The boys leave, shouting their love for Alyosha, “Hurrah for Karamazov!”²⁴

Sometimes forgotten is the great gain that scripture’s story represents for humanity, for, dare one say it, “for us men and for our salvation.” Karamazov, for so much of the novel a name of cursing and misery and buffoonery and lust and hurt, becomes the name which is praised at the end, praised not for itself, but for the message it brings of the risen Lord who redeems all. “Karamazov” has become a word of hope, of good news. So, in the novel as in the Bible, we are left with a surprisingly happy ending. Perhaps that is why Dante thought the gospel’s story was basically comedic, and why for those who walked to Emmaus so long ago as for those who walked to Ilusha’s gravestone in this story, there are these embarrassingly happy surprises. That, I would suggest, is precisely how scripture continues to capture our imaginations and our hearts, by simply telling its story, embarrassing those who hear it with its happiness, surprising us again and again with its rapturous embrace of this world. We are prepared for scripture to do anything but that, to be anything but joyful. Yet, in this novel, it throws down only to raise again. And just so does it tell us how Christ raises us to hope, to participate in his own life and to love his own world.

In his introduction to his book *Orthodoxy*, G.K. Chesterton tells of an Englishman who set out in his own yacht hoping to discover an island in the South Seas. However, because of some navigational miscalculations, he discovers England. He sees his own homeland again, as it were, for the first time. I suggest that the church would do well to undertake just such a voyage and see the Bible again for the first time. That is, we would see it as a means of grace, as that narrative that links us with Israel and the Church in Christ’s story, giving us hope amidst a culture oppressed with itself. I do not argue that the Bible should be worshipped. But it should be venerated, much as an icon is venerated. The Bible should be lifted up as worship begins, raised high as it is brought into the sanctuary. It should be laid open on the communion table or altar, the central place around which God’s people gather. As the Torah is to the synagogue, as it has even inspired dances when its cycle of readings has been completed, so should the Bible be to us, inspiring our imaginations and our worship. Then, when it is read

in worship, we might see it again as for the first time, becoming like the little boy who grew up to be Father Zossima, receiving “the seed of God’s word” in our hearts and rejoicing in the understanding “of something read in the church of God.”²⁵

Notes

¹ C.S. Lewis, *George MacDonald, An Anthology* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1955), 21.

² The phrase is from Nicholas Lash, *Theology on the Way to Emmaus* (London: SCM Press, 1986), 42.

³ Lewis, 22.

⁴ The phrase is from Pope John-Paul II and has been widely used to describe a culture that no longer takes its bearings from the gospel story.

⁵ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. by Constance Garnett (New York: New American Library, 1980), 285.

⁶ See Alyosha’s “Speech at the Stone” where he concludes: “What’s more, perhaps, that one memory may keep us from great evil....” Dostoyevsky, 699.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 297.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 699.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 266.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 267.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 295.

¹² *Ibid.*, 295-6.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 56.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 268-9.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 270.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 264.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 295.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 295.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 332.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 333.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 333-4.

²² *Ibid.*, 699.

²³ *Ibid.*, 700.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 701.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 265.