
GANZ – REWILDING THE WORD #2



A Story

We assume that people who are “gifted” *enjoy* having those gifts.

Maybe. Sometimes.

We who have less glory in us imagine that those who have more must be happier, more joyful, and with an easier life.

The truth is that they are happier if, and only if, they have good friends (who have defeated the seduction of envy), and they will be joyful if they abide in God – a contemplative in action - through the Holy Spirit given us. Joy has no other source.

Romans 5 (NAB): ⁵ and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the holy Spirit that has been given to us.¹

But they certainly do not experience an easier life. Great gifts exact a great price – a life of unceasing effort, of sacrifice, and requiring a steadfast willingness to suffer many conversions from one’s stubbornly persistent mediocrities (“taught my sin-filled heart and mind”) into a stable and humble excellence (“Now my heart sets none above you, for your grace alone I thirst”).

Josiah Conder² (London, 1789-1855; 66 years) is the author of our text (below). He was the man in the Conder family who set the direction of what would be a highly accomplished British family.

Consider the example of just one of Josiah’s achievements: he published *The Modern Traveller* (1830) a geographical encyclopedia in thirty volumes! There followed the *Dictionary of Ancient and Modern Geography* (1834); a translation from Greek of the *Epistle to the Hebrews* (1834); a *Literary History of the New Testament* (1845); then a *Harmony of History with (biblical) Prophecy* (1849). These are just a few of his professional (prose) accomplishments.

But years before he began publishing those learned works, he wrote and published poetry, sacred poetry, a lot of it, many of which were hymns, some of which are revered. To have become such a poet, and of such stature, would have been enough for one life. One scholar³ of Conder’s life and work remarked:

As a hymn writer Josiah Conder ranks among the best. His finest hymns are marked by much elevation of thought expressed in language combining both force and beauty. They generally excel in unity, and in some the gradual unfolding of the leading idea is masterly. The outcome of a deeply spiritual mind, they deal chiefly with the enduring elements of religion.

When each of us considers how difficult it is to get good at even *one* great discipline (e.g., Law, Medicine, Geography; Theology; Engineering; Teaching; Bible; Ancient Languages; Literature, etc.), we feel compelled by admiration to acknowledge *how*

¹ *New American Bible*, Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Ro 5:5.

² I find delight in paying attention to the last names of people, which regularly will reveal a time when who a person or family was had its roots in a profession, a skill, a craft. Here is an example: Josiah’s last name “**Conder**” means as defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: “**2.** A man stationed on an eminence by the shore who signals to fishing-boats the direction taken by the shoals of herring or pilchards; a balker.”

³ John Julian at: https://hymnary.org/person/Conder_J.

superhumanly hard Josiah Conder would have had to work to be so accomplished in so many disciplines.

Not easy. Always.

I am convinced that God *did* bless Josiah with a sustaining JOY – he would have needed it. The depth and beauty of his poetry/hymns gives evidence that this was the case ... and that he knew it – “that if I love you / you, O Lord, have loved me first.”

A Text

In your mercy, Lord, you called me,
taught my sin-filled heart and mind,
else this world had still enthralled me,
and to glory kept me blind.

Lord, I did not freely choose you
till by grace you set me free;
for my heart would still refuse you
had your love not chosen me.

Now my heart sets none above you,
for your grace alone I thirst,
knowing well, that if I love you,
you, O Lord, have loved me first.

A Reading

“In your mercy, Lord” – One ugly experience we can suffer at the hand of another is a “mercy” given us that the giver is not *in*. We can hear the caustic bite of such “mercy” in the statement (sometimes not spoken but worn on the face) “I pity you”. A person *is condescending*⁴ when he or she is not *in* the mercy being demonstrated. The poet here insists that the Lord he knew *was* in the mercy that He showed him - “Lord, you called me.”

⁴ Originally “**to condescend**” was a good word (it still is in British English), which meant an expression of an unexpected courtesy of a person of high rank to one of lower rank or of no rank – such as does God toward human beings. In American English, which how I am using the word here, means “to assume an air of superiority” over another – we say how odious it is to “be condescending” toward another person. Interestingly, both the verb “to pity” and “to condescend” used to mean in American English a beautiful, worthy of praise, quality expressive of a person of character. How both words got wrecked, I do not know.

How? By the deliberate choice of the divine Trinity, the second Divine Person became incarnate, a human, without His identity as God lost or confused but, instead, enriched by becoming one with us *in mercy* through His human nature. One could argue, or at least make a case for the possibility, that we cannot be *in* the mercy that we demonstrate to another person without first becoming one with that other person, allowing our love to reveal to us the otherness of the other person. Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (published 1960) said to his kids:

“You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view –” “Sir?” “ – until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.”

The possibility of real mercy happens when a person experiences (made possible by trust placed in him or her by that other person) what it is like to be that other person, *on the inside*, if you will – by an *indwelling*. Only love gives us this power – to be *in* another without confusion and without meddling.

“had your love not chosen me” - If we are not careful, we can think that someone loves us *because*.... That is, we assume that he or she found a *reason* to do so. We have concluded that *love follows reason* – a sequential thing: first a good reason for our love to be given; second our love given. This is incorrect. We love not because we have a reason; we love *because we do* ... and we do not really know why. Sometimes reasons for the love we feel for another person do present themselves to us, but we know that those are not the real “reason”. This is what the mystic and philosopher and mathematician, Blaise Pascal (1623-1662)⁵ meant when he wrote: “The heart has its reasons, which reason does not know ... We know truth not only by reason but also by the heart.”⁶ Think how awkward it is to give reasons to another as to why you love your spouse or your children. We can’t, and so we don’t! No “reason” *is* the reason. We love because we do, even when someone wiser than we might judge us foolish to love those we do. God is foolish like this.

1 Corinthians 1 (REB):²⁵ The folly of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God stronger than human strength. ²⁶ My friends, think what sort of people you are, whom God has called. Few of you are wise by any human standard, few powerful or of noble birth. ²⁷ Yet, to shame the wise, God has chosen what the world counts folly, and to shame what is strong, God has

⁵ From the *New Dictionary of Theology: Historical and Systematic* – “**Pascal**, whose early genius emerged in mathematics, experimental physics, and practical inventions, was converted to Jansenism at Rouen in 1646. He participated in the social, intellectual, and cultural life of Paris until his ‘night of fire’ (1654), an experience of intense assurance, joy, and peace through Christ, leading to the total consecration of his life to God.”

⁶ *Pensees* [423]. In another place he writes: “[424] It is the heart which perceives God and not the reason. That is what faith is: God perceived by the heart, not by the reason. (278)” [Pascal, Blaise. *Pensees* (Penguin Classics) (p. 127). Penguin Books Ltd. Kindle Edition.]

chosen what the world counts weakness. ²⁸ He has chosen things without rank or standing in the world, mere nothings, to overthrow the existing order. ²⁹ So no place is left for any human pride in the presence of God.⁷

“you, O Lord, have loved me first” – God loved us first neither because of who we are, nor because of some way we have performed correctly or generously for God’s sake, to please Him. To state that God loves us expresses the truth that God loves us for no good reason. God is love, and loving is Who God is, and as St. Augustine perceived: God’s love for us is what *makes* us lovable.

An Action

Explore how insufficient are the *reasons* that you could offer as to why you love the people that you do. You can give reasons to one asking you for them, but even as you do, don’t you feel that such “reasons” fall flat? Feel in yourself why it works this way and try to find a way of explaining this fact sufficiently at least to yourself.

Published 25 July 2023

⁷ [*The Revised English Bible*](#) (Cambridge; New York; Melbourne; Madrid; Cape Town; Singapore; São Paulo; Delhi; Dubai; Tokyo: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1 Co 1:25–29.