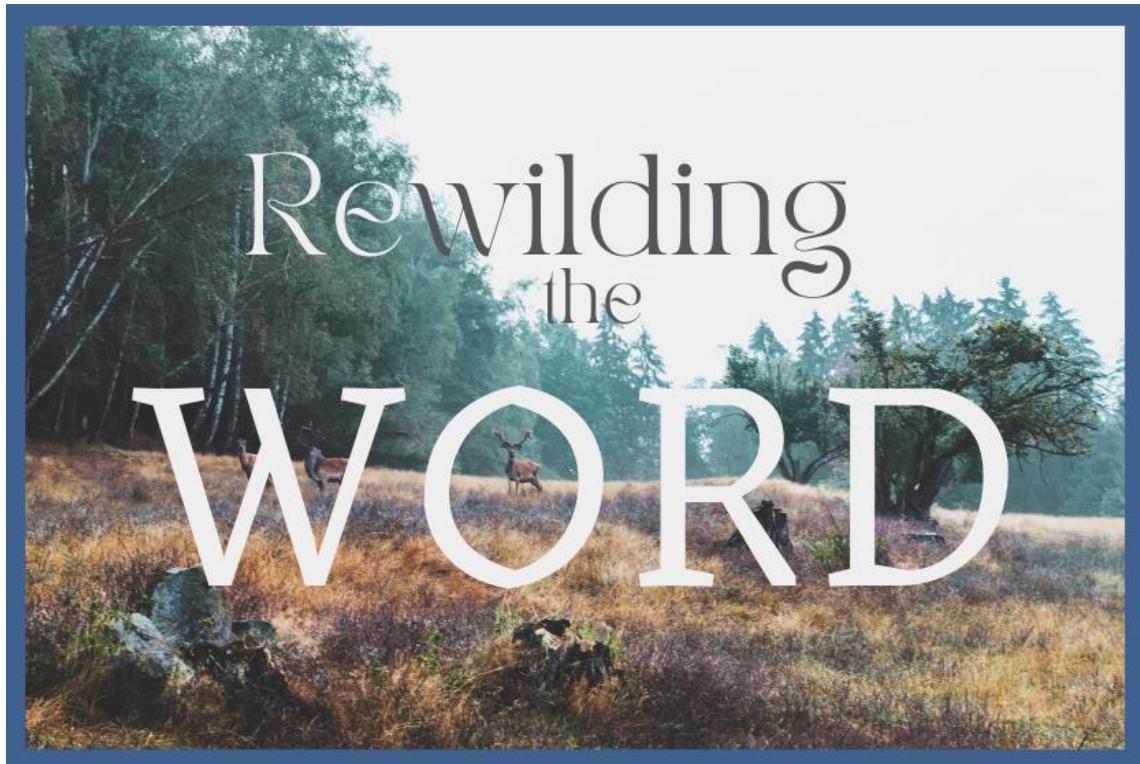

GANZ - #7 - REWILDING THE WORD (MARCH 2024)



A Story

There was a boy, a native of Alexandria, Egypt, who lost his eyesight at the age of 4. History would come to know him as Didymus the Blind (313-398 CE). But for a man who could not see, he was among the greatest Christian biblical scholars and theologians of his time. He worked in the 4th century, which very few Christian

centuries since then can match for the intensity and depth and range of original¹ Christian thinking. About Alexandria, St. John Henry Newman (1801-1890)² wrote:

St. Mark, the founder of the Alexandrian Church³ ... Its catechetical school [called the *Didaskáleion*], founded, (it is said) by the Evangelist himself, was a pattern to other Churches, in its diligent and systematic preparation of candidates [i.e., catechumens] for Baptism.⁴

Didymus was profoundly influenced by Origen of Alexandria (185-283 CE)⁵, “the greatest [biblical and theological] genius the early Church ever produced”, who had founded the famous school of spiritual formation and Christian theology – the *Didaskáleion*⁶ - a generation before Didymus. Didymus never became the head of that school, but he became one of its most celebrated scholars. They called such as he a *scholarch*,⁷ and about him this:

¹ “original” – What I mean here is that these thinkers thought about the meaning of Christ in ways that no one had yet thought. They did this because of the interest people had in that early period to know about “this Jesus Christ about whom we are hearing”. Also, they did this because they needed to learn how to “incarnate” the meaning of the God-Man within the culture of the Greco-Roman world, to make sense of this great Mystery of God and God’s way with human beings, *to give reasons* to those asking.

² Newman was canonized a Saint on 13 October 2019, by Pope Francis I, in St. Peter's Square.

³ Newman here echoes the traditional belief that St. Mark, after the resurrected Jesus Christ had ascended to Heaven, deployed to the great city of ancient learning, Alexandria in the delta of the Nile River, building a Christian community there, which became one of the most famous centers of learning in early Christianity. Recall how it is widely concluded that St. Mark was the inventor of the “Gospel” literary form, that it was he who wrote/dictated the “first” Gospel – the Gospel According to Mark. Scholars now do not agree that the *Didaskaleion* was “founded” by St. Mark, but by Origen of Alexandria in the 3rd century.

⁴ John Henry Newman, *The Arians of the Fourth Century* (London: J. G. & F. Rivington, 1833), 45.

⁵ About whom John Henry Newman wrote: “Origen, who was soon after appointed catechist at the early age of eighteen, had already given the earnest of his future celebrity, by his persuasive disputation with the unbelievers of Alexandria.” [John Henry Newman, *The Arians of the Fourth Century* (London: J. G. & F. Rivington, 1833), 46.]

⁶ A *didáskalos* is one who trained students in what was the rapidly developing and deepening Christian theology. The name given to such students, accepted into this school in Alexandria, was *catechumen*. The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “catechumen” - 1. - a1500 - A new convert under instruction before baptism.

⁷ “scholarch”; that is, a Master Teacher of teachers – The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “scholarch” - 2. - 1846 - *historical*. The head of a school; spec. the head of an ancient Greek school of philosophy.

Didymus shows himself to be a typical schoolteacher and reveals his attachment to the local bishop [of Alexandria]. ... Scholars favor the acceptance of a continuity of Didymus with the *Didaskáleion* founded by Origen and linked to episcopal institutions. The fact that Palladius, speaking of his "cell" (*Hist. laus.* IV,3), suggests that Didymus led a monastic life, does not in the least contradict his role as a teacher of the *Didaskáleion*. Early monasticism, especially in Egypt, took quite different forms from the literary mythology of withdrawal to the desert, and **many monks lived in cities.**⁸

Because Didymus lacked physical sight, he developed his memory prodigiously⁹. So that as he heard read to him the Scriptures, and a vast library of theological books and biblical commentaries, he retained to startling degree both general and specific memories of all of them.

In our current American moment, we must consider what great harm has come to our first "power of soul"¹⁰ – memory – which we have failed to build, to train, and to colonize with images and thoughts truly worth remembering. Instead, we "look things up", using search engines, or we go find what we are looking for in familiar books. *We refuse to work at our memory.* We give over a central power of soul to machines! And now we are given the opportunity to let A.I. find for us that which we have forgotten. How interesting, isn't it, in a frightening sort of way, that we as a nation appear to be more and more susceptible to the onset of Alzheimer's disease.¹¹ We have been practicing for it for a long time!¹²

⁸ Emanuela Prinzivalli, "[Didymus the Blind of Alexandria](#)," *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic; InterVarsity Press, 2014) 710.

⁹ The *Oxford English Dictionary* at the adverb "**prodigiously**" – **1. – 1541** – Wonderfully, amazingly; (also) to a great extent or degree; extremely, immensely; prolifically, copiously.

¹⁰ "**power of soul**" – One can recognize the presence of one's soul – that one has one! – by noticing the *powers* one possesses that cannot have their source in our physical being. Traditionally there are identified three powers: (1) memory/imagination and (2) understanding and (3) will/affect. But as with other human powers, we by the exercise of our freedom have the ability, and must, develop the strength and range of these powers; *we must work at them.*

¹¹ "**Alzheimer's disease**" – The *Oxford English Dictionary*: **I.1. – 1911 – Alzheimer's disease noun** (also **Alzheimer disease**) A common form of dementia (progressive mental deterioration) typically beginning in late middle age, characterized clinically by memory loss, confusion, and disorientation, and pathologically by degeneration and loss of neurons and the presence of neurofibrillary tangles and senile plaques in certain parts of the brain.

¹² When I was a boy, in grade school, there had developed in the school system a strong distaste for making students *memorize*. Part of this distaste was developed in us by teachers who never helped us understand why the development of the power of memory was humanly essential. They could have

He composed in his head, and then dictated to scribes, his own deeply learned books. And as with all the greatest teachers of the early Church¹³ (especially of the first six centuries), the study of the Old and New Testaments was the central task, the primary font of all theological and spiritual understanding.

What, I wonder, does Didymus, a blind man, “see” in Psalm 23, who may have never seen sheep or restful waters or shepherds at work with their flocks in the wilderness? Because of a discovery of his *Commentary on the Psalms* in 1941, we can find out.

A Text: Psalm 23 (NEB) – a Psalm of David

¹ The LORD is my shepherd; I shall want nothing.

² He makes me lie down in green pastures,
and leads me beside the waters of peace;

³ he renews life within me,
and for his name’s sake guides me in the right path.

⁴ Even though I walk through a valley dark as death
I fear no evil, for thou art with me,
thy staff and thy crook are my comfort.

⁵ Thou spreadest a table for me in the sight of my enemies;
thou hast richly bathed my head with oil,
and my cup runs over.

⁶ Goodness and love unfailing, these will follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
my whole life long.¹⁴

analogize to athletes who never miss the requirement that they build strong muscles, training them hard and consistently. As a result, the American educational system formally scorned the development in students of one of the three most important powers of soul. We called it scornfully “rote memorization”.

¹³ We call these greatest of teachers of Christian theology and philosophy in the first six Christian centuries, most all of whom were Saints, “the Fathers of the Church.” There has developed an interest in knowing whether there existed at the same time “Mothers of the Church”, whose writings we ought to edit and make available. The hunt has been on. But in doing this, we overlook how each of the Fathers of the Church had mothers, and some of the most famous of those moms are formally acknowledged by the Church as Saints. A rare man it is whose spirituality was not significantly formed by that of his mother.

¹⁴ [The New English Bible](#) (New York: Oxford University Press; Cambridge University Press, 1970), Ps 23.

A Reading – With Special Attention to Didymus the Blind

“he makes me lie down in green pastures” – Didymus notices how we – the sheep/souls – are *always on the move*. Though this Psalm breathes serenity and “rest”, notice how many verbs of movement there are – “leads … renews … guides … walks … follow”. St. Ignatius of Loyola (1492-1556) wrote that Christ is always *laboring* and so we should be content to labor also.¹⁵ N.T. Wright¹⁶ remarks that from the moment of Christ’s death on the Cross, and then after His resurrection and ascension, the real work, the revolution that is the Kingdom of God finally and fully began. Didymus, emphasizing how the “sheep” are a metaphor for the human soul, wrote:

In a place, then, of tender grass, there he causes me to encamp. He did not cause me to settle, but he caused me to encamp there [a temporary shelter]. Now, the tent signifies progress. “I shall proceed to a place of a marvelous tent, as far as the house of God.”¹² The one who makes progress has a portable house: virtue itself. ¹⁷

I can think of no better expression of Jeremiah 31 than Didymus’ image of the “portable house: virtue itself”.

³² It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors the day I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt. They broke my covenant, though I was their master – oracle of the Lord.^s ³³ But this is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after those days – oracle of the Lord. **I will place my law within them and write it upon their hearts;** I will be their God, and they shall be my people.^t ³⁴ They will no longer teach their friends and relatives,

¹⁵ See, for example, the *Spiritual Exercises*, in “The Contemplation of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ” [93] – “Therefore, everyone who wishes to accompany me should be ready for no food, clothes, and other things besides those he sees me use. He or she should also persevere through **the same daily labors, night watches**, and other situations with me so that he or she will be a part of the victory and joy, because he or she stood with me in labor and difficulties.”

¹⁶ See his *The Day the Revolution Began: Reconsidering the Meaning of Jesus’ Crucifixion* (2016).

^{*12} Ps 42:4 (41:5 NETS).

¹⁷ Didymus the Blind, *Lectures on the Psalms*, ed. Jonathan Douglas Hicks et al., trans. Jonathan Douglas Hicks, Ancient Christian Texts (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2024), 54.

^s Ex 24:7–8; Dt 5:2.

^t Jer 32:40; Ez 37:26; Heb 10:16.

“Know the Lord!” **Everyone, from least to greatest, shall know me** – oracle of the Lord – for I will forgive their iniquity and no longer remember their sin.^{u 18}

A shepherd leads from the outside; virtue leads a person from his or her inside. The latter is the goal, what St. Ignatius of Loyola means by “always growing in devotion”, which is another way of expressing what he means by “finding God in all things.”

“he renews life within me” [or, “he restores my soul”] – Notice the unexpected shift here. We would assume that it is the “restful waters” and the “green grass” that “renews” or “restores” us. Not for the Psalmist here. It is *the shepherd* who accomplishes this. It is the *way* that the shepherd is; His personality in His leadership of us, in His care for us. Didymus argues that this Psalm describes a development of the soul from always needing to be attended to by God (Jeremiah 31:31 – “I took them by the hand to lead them”) – to becoming a soul so familiar with God and God’s ways that *it can lead itself* (virtue) – a soul now mature and deeply conformed to God. This is what it means to “walk in the paths of righteousness”. As Jesus insisted, “I do nothing on my own; I only do what the Father tells me.” Didymus explains:

Next, since he mentions pasture, grass, and water, he immediately transfers his discourse toward *the inner man* and says, *He restored my soul*. By restoration [59] change is signified. **I no longer remain a sheep; I am no longer under a shepherd;** I do not have an appetite for water. *He restored my soul*. What, however, took place with my soul when it was restored? God *led it into paths of righteousness*. The *paths of righteousness* are the **virtues** or the practices of the virtues.¹⁹

St. Ignatius of Loyola teaches that the highest point of spirituality is *familiarity with God*, such that in all our thinking and doing and planning we, with St. Peter, could say, and mean:

^u Is 54:13.

¹⁸ [New American Bible](#), Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Je 31:32–34.

¹⁹ Didymus the Blind, [Lectures on the Psalms](#), ed. Jonathan Douglas Hicks et al., trans. Jonathan Douglas Hicks, Ancient Christian Texts (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2024), 54–55.

⁶⁸ Simon Peter answered him, “Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. ⁶⁹ We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God.”^{d 20}

“and for his name’s sake” – Notice this subtlety: the good shepherd acts as he does for the renewal/ restoration of his sheep *because of the kind of person he is*. It is not that a shepherd is good because the needs of his sheep make him be the shepherd that they prefer! No, our needs before God do not *make* God be the way that He is. The shepherd is good *in himself*, who “already knows what you/the sheep need before you ask it.” Didymus remarks:

Not so much because of my worthiness as *because of his own name* did he offer this to me. For even when someone rushes toward good things, even when he is desirous of them, unless God shows him mercy, he does not obtain the things that are desired. Even in the 119th Psalm it is said, for example: “I ran the way of your commandments, when you made my heart spacious.”²³ **Because you enlarged my heart and have given it breadth, I ran the way of your commandments.** Therefore, one always obtains the things desired because of God. ... For he created rational creatures, in order that they should partake of his name. By “name” I do not mean that which is composed of syllables, *but that which demonstrates what is named by its quality*. Indeed, the definition of *name* is rendered as follows: “Name is a summarizing designation that indicates the very quality of the thing named.”²¹

What a beautiful expression, and insight: “You have enlarged my heart and have given it breadth.” Notice how we did not or could not have asked this of the good Shepherd, because we did not know that we needed it. We asked for fresh water and green grass. But because the Shepherd is *good*, He knows what we need even when we do not know what we need.

An Action

^d 11:27; Mt 16:16; Mk 1:24; Lk 4:34.

²⁰ [New American Bible](#), Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Jn 6:68–69.

²³ Ps 119:32 (118:32 NETS).

²¹ Didymus the Blind, [Lectures on the Psalms](#), ed. Jonathan Douglas Hicks et al., trans. Jonathan Douglas Hicks, Ancient Christian Texts (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2024), 55–56.

My suggestion is for you to try an experiment, doing so in imitation of the life and work of Didymus the Blind. When next you go to a Church Service, through as much of that Service as you can practically maintain it, keep your eyes closed – *make yourself blind*. See how much you can *see* because you cannot see. What does your blindness make possible for you to notice, to learn, and to focus on? Do you notice how being able to see can cause you to miss so much?