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A Word of Hope

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A WORD OF HOPE

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Years ago when I was an undergraduate at a small Christian liberal arts college, I was sitting in our chapel auditorium waiting for the sermon. The chaplain walked to the lectern, opened his Bible, and read for us the familiar parable of the Good Samaritan. He ended the reading from Scripture with these words, "The road from Jerusalem to Jericho runs straight through your dorm room." He paused, and we expected the sermon. Then, after a moment of silence, he dismissed us. What power in few words!

I want to argue that words, though limited are God's gift to us humans: they have the potential to communicate. For I believe that words, rooted in God's creative Word, do have meaning, a meaning which we can discover. The reader may respond that such a statement is hardly startling: many persons have always assumed that words and sentences and paragraphs had the potential to communicate a commonly

accepted meaning.

But in fact we have been heavily influenced by those who have a profound skepticism about the ability of language to communicate. In Samuel Beckett's provocative play *Endgame*, two men, Hamm and Clov, are talking:

Clov: What is it?

Hamm: We're not beginning to . . . to . . . mean something?

Clov: Mean something! You and I, mean something!

(Brief laugh)

Ah, that's a good one!

All language and all knowledge--we are told, usually much less succinctly--is a matter of perspective: your perspective, my perspective, anyone's perspective; and no perspective is to be trusted. As Richard Rorty writes in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, "To say that truth is not out there is simply to say that where there are no sentences there is not truth, that sentences are elements of human languages, and that human languages are human creations." This postmodernist view of language is rooted in a profound skepticism about the possibility of arriving

at any commonality of meaning, any truth.

In Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*, Hazel Motes, the Jesus-fleeing prophet, preaches this disturbing word from the hood of his rat-colored Essex:

I preach there are all kinds of truth, your truth and somebody else's, but behind all of them, there's only one truth and that is that there is no truth. . . . No truths behind all truths is what I and this church preach! Where you come from is gone, where you thought you were going to never was there, and where you are is no good unless you can get away from it. Where is there a place for you to be? No place.

Much of contemporary literary theory is based on a worldview which is--after one cuts through the complex verbiage--very similar to Hazel Motes'. In brief, there is no truth, there are only (possibly) useful interpretations for our times.

Fortunately, there are also more hopeful voices being heard among our academic colleagues. Victor Brombert, past president of the influential Modern Language Association,

calls for a new look at the extreme subjectivist posture of much contemporary literary theory. In his 1989 MLA presidential address, he suggests that there has been a "general tendency [for the literary critic] to seek refuge in a highly specialized terminology, to lock oneself up in hermetic discourses allowing for no intellectual commerce." In Brombert's view, "The critic who lacks humility before a work of art and refuses to accept the role of attentive mediator and interpreter is likely to assume as well a doctrinaire stance and a presumptuous critical absolutism." Both the primary text and the interpretative word can have meaning, Brombert seem to assume. Thus there can be the basis for commonality of discourse.

Further, as Christian readers and critics, we affirm that language is God's gift to humans. The Creative Word, the Divine Word, who was from the beginning with God, is linked with our ability to use words, words which have meaningful content, words which we can mutually explore.

But having asserted that language is God's gift to humans, and having posited that we can explore commonalities

of meaning, let me hasten to add a clarifying word: the act of speaking or writing or interpreting is a distinctively human act. Some time ago I heard an earnest pastor say, "I don't interpret Scripture; I simply accept it for what it says." In a similar vein another preacher recently declared that there was only one obvious--or even possible interpretation of Jesus' parable about sewing new cloth on an old garment. But when the speaker offered his one interpretation, his explanation did not seem persuasive to me.

In "East Coker" T.S. Eliot writes with poignancy about the difficulty of human language, of the continuing struggle we have to communicate with each other:

So here I am, in the middle way, having had twenty
years--

Twenty years largely wasted, the years of l'entre deux
guerres

Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt

Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure

Because one has only learnt to get the better of words

For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in
which

One is no longer disposed to say it. And so each
venture

Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate

With shabby equipment always deteriorating

In the general mess of imprecision of feeling,

Undisciplined squads of emotion.

Shabby equipment, messy emotions, imprecise words--in
short, a human language which is never fully adequate to the
task of communicating. At best the work is daunting. But
often we are not at our best. In the words of Victor
Brombert, whom I cited earlier, there is "considerable
silliness in most sophisticated contemporary criticism:
pretentious gibberish in the articles and books that flow
from our presses, hermetic clowning at tiresome symposia."

The task of interpretation, of mediation, is
difficult--and we must admit our own biases, our sometimes
myopic vision, as well as the limitations of language. Yet
our goal is to hear what the work itself has to say. Our

theories and rules should not place barriers between ourselves and the text but should enhance our reading.

For we believe that both within and behind the text there is meaning: it is not all a hall of mirrors or a mirage in the desert of ambiguity. In the words of Eliot's narrator in "Little Gidding":

With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this
calling

We shall not cease from our exploration

And the end of all our exploring

Will be to arrive where we started

And know the place for the first time.

I have argued that language is a special gift, even a divine gift, and, further, I have contended that within diversity we can work toward some commonalities of meaning in the interpretation of a text. The text does have its own integrity, whether it is the biblical text, or the text of a novel or play or poem or short story. Interpretation is, however, a very human and fallible art.

A further caveat: words are not fully adequate to

convey the fullness and richness, the complexities and mysteries, the height and the depth of life. On the one hand, I fully accept that the God who spoke the world into being manifested himself to us in Jesus: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father" (John 1:14, RSV). In this incarnation the human family received a new potential for meaning, a deeper hope for understanding.

At the same time we must acknowledge that there exist mysteries which our words seem inadequate to articulate, ambiguities beyond our verbal power to unravel. Life cannot be reduced to simple, well-ordered, descriptive narrative. In William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* one of the narrators says, "There are some things for which three words are three too many, and three thousand words that many too less, and this is one of them."

On a bright September day almost four years ago my wife and I received an urgent call to go to the Emergency Room in one of our local hospitals. Our daughter, who had just been

graduated from a Christian college with a baccalaureate degree in nursing, had, we were told, been involved in a serious vehicular accident. After my wife and I had waited some few eternal minutes in the Trauma Unit, a young resident doctor came out, and with eyes bright with unshed tears, said, "We did all we knew how to do."

What words exist in any language to communicate fully our sense of loss, of gut-wrenching pain, as we stepped over to a nearby room to see the bruised, silent body of our daughter, who had left home, whole and healthy, that Friday morning?

How do we begin to speak to our friends and family about that which seems unspeakable? And where are the words to cry out to God, whom we had believed to be both omnipotent and good?

In "Burnt Norton" Eliot writes,

Words move, music moves

Only in time; but that which is only living

Can only die. Words, after speech, reach

Into the silence. Only by the form, the pattern,

Can words or music reach

The stillness, as a Chinese jar still

Moves perpetually in its stillness.

Even as our words lapse into silence, there remains for the believer the underlying faith that the Word which became flesh, the Eternal Word which paradoxically shared our limitations of language, there persists, I say, the trust that he will accept and interpret our inarticulateness. As the Apostle Paul writes, "In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know how we ought to pray, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express" (Romans 8:26, NIV).

Thus we affirm that despite the inadequacies and ambiguities of language, we are not left orphaned on a vast shore of postmodern meaninglessness. The Word which became flesh burns our tongues, enlightens our minds, gives us hope. There is a truth behind all truths.

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