News and Knowledge

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July 6, 1997

The word Gospel derives from an Anglo-Saxon phrase Good Spell, meaning “Good News.” The title tells us something important about the text that is to follow: it’s not a philosophy, it’s a proclamation; it isn’t a general statement about the structure of the universe, it’s an urgent demand in the here and now; it’s not a theology, it’s a challenge, and a challenge aimed not generally but personally. Another title that might have had the same effect is “Hey you, listen to this!” or “(Your name here): Open Immediately.” The aim of the text is not to satisfy our curiosity or to please our intellects, but to call us, to summon us, individually and collectively, to make an answer to which, and for which, we can be accountable. It is a text which makes a moral demand upon us, not an intellectual demand, a demand that we become something that we were not before we heard it, that we transform ourselves into a new habit of being which only the text itself lights our way towards. To hear it, you must change your life. And one only interprets it by changing one’s life.

Even as it is a text which seeks to change what we are, it is a text which changes what we were, for if we heed it, we discover ourselves to have been already different persons from what we thought we were, for the experience of reading the text in the spirit in which it was written causes us to discover in ourselves a potentiality, a capacity for responsiveness to the immediate presence of the divine, that we would not otherwise have known the first thing about. To read it is to recognize one’s self for the first time, to hear one’s own true name, to discover one’s self as someone called.

Something of this tremendous urgency is conveyed in the Gospel according to Mark, traditionally the earliest of the accounts of the life of Jesus. The Gospel of Matthew describes a sect within Judaism, and is concerned with establishing the place of the teachings of Jesus in the Jewish tradition. The Gospel of Luke describes a new world religion, offering promises to the Gentiles, paying tender attention to the vulnerable and the powerless, and preaching an ethos of forgiveness. But Mark is different—a brief, harsh, and above all personal account of an intense
presence. Written in a crude koiné Greek full of Aramaic locutions, it is clearly the work of a humble, at best modestly educated author, with imperfect command of the language of authority, the kind of person who would not normally write anything, much less a world-changing testament. Mark’s crudity of style shows him as a man whom only the almost unbearable burden of his message could have forced into being an author. He is not a writer who chooses a divine subject, but a painfully inarticulate man summoned to write by divinity. Mark’s Gospel’s brevity, its terseness, the way it leaps immediately from one episode to the next, without explanation or connecting links or even development of details, bespeaks someone writing under the pressure of an intense urgency. It is a catalogue of enigmatic, unexplained events presented under an intense, narrowly focused spotlight which leaves the context, the background, everything but the climaxes of the stories, in complete darkness. Mark is a man in a hurry, a hurry to get his word out before he loses the means or before it is too late. What he wishes to bear witness to is not only the apocalyptic secret he bears—Mark’s Gospel is not the founding text of a new religion, it is the tidings of the imminent end of the world—but also to the impress of a commanding and difficult personality, who magnetized and mystified the disciples, and whose urgent and all-demanding character all but breaks Mark’s language under the strain. Mark, much more than Matthew, Luke, or John, is a witness to a man, and his message is over and over again: here he is, recognize him, this is what he is, his time is this time. This is why Mark dwells time and time again on scenes where Jesus astonishingly reveals what he is, why his Gospel opens not with the Genealogy of Jesus (like Matthew) or with the story of his birth (like Luke) but with that shattering scene in which John the Baptist, baptizing all comers in the Jordan, suddenly recognizes in Jesus the man he has been waiting for: This is him, now is the time. The great drama of Mark is always the drama of recognition: the sick and the possessed who repeatedly accost Jesus in Mark do so because they somehow know who he is, and the demons he casts out of man in Capernaum and out of the man in the country of the Gerasenes know immediately whom they are dealing with as well. The drama of Mark is always the drama of instant but profound recognition, the taking up of a calling, and the taking up of a personal allegiance to man whose divinity is never abstract and always exerts a concrete and unmistakable pressure:

And passing along by the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net in the sea; for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you become fishers of men.” And immediately they left their nets and followed him. And going on a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets. And
immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants, and followed him.

It’s as simple and as bewildering as that. Surely it is truer of Mark than of almost anyone that, as Kierkegaard says, the central fact of Christianity is not a teaching but a teacher, not a doctrine but the living, mystifying, even terrible presence of Jesus of Nazareth.

Religious thought is a special kind of thought, and one that it is very easy to be wrong about. One of the first things to bear in mind about it is that it deals not, or not chiefly, with a general claim about the way the world is, but with a specific demand about what we are to do in it now. The difference between these two things is roughly the difference between knowledge, a bird’s eye view of the whole universe, and news, specifically the Good News, the good spell.

I owe the distinction between knowledge and news to the novelist Walker Percy, whose essay “The Message in the Bottle” develops the distinction in greater detail and with more wit and precision than I can do here. In the essay Percy asks us to imagine the predicament of a man shipwrecked on a strange island. His immediate needs, or at least his physical ones, are taken care of. But he has no knowledge of where he came from or of what he was before he became shipwrecked, although he does know everything he needs to know to get by on a day to day basis on the island. He knows how to do what he has to do, but he doesn’t know who he is, what his home is, what his origin is. He has knowledge aplenty, this is to say, but he doesn’t have a personal history (or at least there is a big whole in that history) and to that extent there is something missing in his identity, that grounding which a knowledge of who you are and from what you spring might give you.

Percy’s castaway is intended to be a picture of how he sees us human beings when we are cast on our own resources. As he is cast away by shipwreck onto his island, so we are thrown into the world by birth.

We like to imagine ourselves as capable of making sense of our lives, of somehow fitting all of our various and miscellaneous adventures into one story with a beginning a middle and an end, and a few major themes that hold together in one big moral, maybe, or at least are more than rags and patches thrown together. But much of that story is not under our control, and to the extent that random accidents and casualties happen to us we cannot shape our story in a way that we know beforehand will make sense. I am not in control of the fact of my mortality, for instance: however important my story is, it will have an ending, and it may well have an ending that comes up while I still think it has many loose strings to be tied up. I of course know intellectually that there is a world that will go on without me, but my consciousness is so central a part of my experience of the world that I can’t say I have a clear idea of what it would be like for that consciousness to fade out,
indeed I won’t be conscious of that. More than this, I cannot know, even up to the moment it occurs, whether the circumstances of my own death will be meaningful or merely dreary, or worse, painful and alienating, or worse yet, farcical and empty. We all know of people who have faced fatal circumstances in a way whose bravery and dignity were able to give meaning to the outcome even in the face of their inability to change it. Indeed, some of the highest acts of meaning under our control arise from what we do in the face of what is not under our control, as for instance the bravery of many people I have known who have died of cancer or AIDS. Under the constraint of death, such people discover a kind of freedom, the freedom to choose courage over cowardice, or nobility over narcissism. “If I fall out of an airplane,” a friend once told me, “it may not be up to me whether I fall all the way down, but it will still be up to me whether I fall bravely or not.”

But of course we don’t always have even the luck of facing death bravely. We all know of people who were thrown into death without an instant’s consciousness of it, and although I tell myself that at least such people did not have to fear what was going to happen to them, I also cannot help but feel that the prospect of such a thing happening to me is more than a little humiliating. I wouldn’t want to be hit by a truck while telling a joke. Mortality is often an occasion for meaning, but we cannot flatter ourselves that every death we can imagine for ourselves is meaningful.

Still less are we in a position to make meaning of the circumstances of our birth.

The use we make of the world into which we are thrown is something we have some control over. But it is not up to us where we are thrown into it. If mortality is so often random and contingent, how much more so is natality, our simple appearance in the world for reasons we are not privy to in a place we not only did not choose but cannot ever really understand. Forrest Church says of religion that it arises from the two great mysteries, the mystery of being born and the mystery of having to die. But the depth of the mystery is in proportion to our horror at the suspicion that both of these events might be quite random.

Like the shipwrecked man in Walker Percy’s parable, we are thrown into the world, and have to figure out what to make of it—not just how to get by in it, but what it means that we are in it at all—more or less unaided. But that isn’t to say that the man in Percy’s parable has nothing to go on. One might think that he has the beauty of the island, say, or the regularity of its processes, to give him some idea of gee, what a grand place it is, and what a grand maker it all must have. But that doesn’t get him very far. For one thing, it doesn’t answer his sense of having been shipwrecked there. And it doesn’t answer that huge but vague homesickness he feels for the mainland he has, in his shipwreckedness, no clear memory of. It’s this sense of homelessness and longing, homelessness for a home he does not know
anything about, and longing for something he cannot name, much less attain, that is for Percy the root of the religious sense. (It’s much more so than, say, the standing in awe of the beauty of the island or in awe of the workings of its natural rhythms, which would seem to Percy to be elaborate ways of giving up, of being made of fool of by the initial huge joke of his random shipwreck.)

The shipwrecked man does have more than his longing and homelessness to go on, however, for in Percy’s parable he keeps receiving messages in bottles, thousands of them. Many of them are strange. Here is a list from Percy’s essay:

- Lead melts at 330 degrees.
- $2 + 2 = 4$.
- Chicago, a city, is on Lake Michigan.
- Chicago is on the Hudson River or Chicago is not on the Hudson River.
- The British are coming.
- The market for eggs is very good.
- If water John brick is.
- Jane will arrive tomorrow.
- The Atman is the Brahman.
- Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean.
- In 1943 the Russians murdered 10,000 Polish officers in the Katyn forest.
- I am the Way and the Truth and the Life.

As you can see from Percy’s whimsical list, the sentences are of many kinds. Some are things claims which you can test by looking out carefully at the world. (Lead melts at 330 degrees.) Some are claims which you know to be true without looking out at the world, but they don’t tell you anything much either: “Either Chicago is on the Hudson River or it is not” is a true sentence, but you don’t know anything once you know that. Some sentences make claims about the world, but we don’t know how to test their truth (The Atman is the Brahman). Some are general and repeatable ($2$ and $2$ is always four), and some are specific and nonrepeatable (the Polish officers were only killed once). Percy’s castaway separates these sentences into two large piles, one of which he calls “Knowledge,” and the other of which he calls “News.”
By “Knowledge,” he means general truths, things that are true always and everywhere. The seeker after knowledge seeks an account of the organizing principles of the universe. He seeks to see how things look sub specie aeternaeatatis, that is to say, under the eye of eternity. he values objectivity and distance, although that objectivity is heightened by an appreciation for the beauties of pattern and variation. The seeker after knowledge is also in search of things that can be tested: he only says something if he knows its true, and he won’t take your word for it that its so unless you can tell him how you know it. The highest kind of knowledge is highly abstract, and far removed from the person and needs of the knower. It’s in formulae that don’t have a feel of a person about them, things like \( E = MC^2 \) or \( F = MA \).

“News,” by contrast, only bears on the here and now, and speaks to the immediate needs of the person who hears it: “there is fresh water in the next valley,” for instance, or “this building is on fire!” These claims don’t count for much in the grand scheme of things, but they may matter to you intensely if you are in the situation they apply to. News is smaller than knowledge, but it is situated, it has a place in life, in ways that knowledge does not have; it is human, and marked with our needs, our personalities. \( E = MC^2 \) means the same, and weighs the same, to everyone. But “this building is on fire” speaks to the condition of the people in the building, and means nothing to people on Bora Bora. News means nothing to you if you are outside of its horizon, but few things mean as much if you are within it, if you are within the burning building. News has a smaller range, but a more intense investment.

News also has an urgency that knowledge does not have. If I take “there is fresh water in the next valley” as knowledge, I may or may not be moved to go see for myself whether it is so. But if I take it as news, which is to say if I hear it while I am dying of thirst, I don’t pause to consider but throw everything down and run to drink. If I’m told that the building is on fire I don’t pause to verify it, unless the teller is a known lunatic or practical joker I run out of the house. With knowledge, verification comes before the response, but with news it comes after, the response being immediate.

One way of putting the difference is this: when I hear knowledge, I seek to confirm it. But when I hear news, if I am the person for whom it is news, the person to whose urgencies it responds, I seek to heed it, to act upon it, and immediately. If I am in a burning building and someone says, “Come! I know the way out!” I do not try to confirm what he says, I follow him immediately, and only confirm it later (once he has gotten me lost, perhaps).

Percy’s point in making this distinction between news and knowledge is to observe that what speaks to the condition of the castaway is news, not knowledge. Or to put it another way, the urgent thing that people who are thrown into life seek
is more like news than like knowledge, which is to say that religious thought is finally a great deal more like news than it is like knowledge. For one thing, it is personal and specific, not universal and general. For another, it is urgent and demands action, not temperate and demanding contemplation. And for a third thing, as in news, so in religion, confirmation follows belief and does not precede it. I do not give my assent to a picture of the world until I have tested it with reason. But I cannot comprehend the inner reasons of my faith until I have already committed myself to it; I do not think that my faith is irrational, indeed, I always seek to develop and deepen my faith through critical reflection. But in religion faith enables rationality, not the other way around: I seek to understand, and I believe in order to understand, but I cannot understand unless I already believe.

How often do we get this wrong, thinking of religious thought as an exalted branch of knowledge, rather than as the most personal of news. I might, for instance, attempt to give religious importance to some of the deep symmetries of physical law, or to the vastness of physical space, or to the beauty of logic and mathematics, or to the dense interplay of pattern and variation in the living world. Or I might invent and describe the relations among a host of capital lettered abstractions—the First Cause, the Prime Mover, the Ground of Being, the Guarantor of Meaning, the Source of Good. But no matter with how loud a voice I speak those abstract names, I cannot love what they describe, and a contraption of abstract names, the Watchmaker God so reasonably proposed by the Enlightenment, seems as dead a thing to me as a god made of rocks and sticks. During the French Revolution Robespierre sought to enthrone Reason, and in its honor he staged an elaborate and unintentionally very ludicrous pageant of the Supreme Being. But how much better can the god of the philosophers be than that. It will always be an “it,” a god whose death we cannot mourn because unlike the God of Abraham and Moses and Jesus, it was never alive to begin with.

What the shipwrecked man needs most is news, news aimed at him, and news of his homeland, that place he is most intimately bound to but which is in every concrete way unknown to him. Knowledge will tell him the structure of his life. But only news will make it bearable.

In Spanish there are two verbs meaning “to know.” One of them, “saber,” is used for intellectual knowledge, knowledge of the melting point of lead or the distance to Alpha Centauri. For personal knowledge, the kind of knowledge one speaks about when one says “I know Shuma,” or “I know Phil,” one uses the word “conocer.” I think religious knowledge is “conocer” knowledge much more than it is “saber” knowledge. It refers not to a body of facts but to a shared habit of intimacy, to a way of life one can only feel from the inside but never exhaustively describe from the outside. “Conocer” knowledge is not what you know but a kind of knowing, a light cast on the world, not anything picked out by that light, a way
of living, a barely articulable but intensely felt experience.

Think of what you know when you really know a person. One of the chief things you know is that you will never have that person’s number, that that person’s case will always somehow be with you an open one, and that you will always remain open to surprise and delight in that person’s presence. The more we know about people we love, the more we feel there is to know. We enable ourselves to concede that such persons will always be a bit mysterious to us.

Only those persons we don’t really care about at all do we think we have gotten to the bottom of. “Oh,” we say, I know what he’s all about, and I know what he’s going to say (and therefore don’t really have to listen to what he says). Someone you know intimately is never somebody whose responses are utterly predictable to you, because you remain alive to the variegation and play of change in their inner lives. And what is more, someone whom you know intimately is someone to whom you grant the privilege of having a story that is never already over. What this means is that there is always an unknowing at the heart of all intimate knowing, and that intimately knowing someone is granting them the privilege of always being in mysteries and doubts about them, without irritably reaching after an explanation which will finally settle their case. We do not explain people we love, although we seek all the explanations. We keep faith with them. And we know that whatever we know about them, they are larger than any theory we may entertain about them is. There is always some strangeness with which love asks us to keep faith and which faith turns to good purpose, to fresher intimacies.

I submit that religious knowing is like that: its a deep and inward knowing-by-unknowing that keeps one face to face with what is always larger than what we can articulate about it. Indeed, knowing about God, faith, seems to be not only the deepest kind of conocer knowledge, but even the precondition of other intimacies. I must keep faith with mystery to love the mysterious in other persons. But the first person I keep in mind is Jesus, that most mystifying, and most demanding, but also most intimate of all. Certainly of all people he is the one I have least gotten to the bottom of, but also the one who most demands of me that I come, that this is the place and now is the time.