

Can the Last Really be First?

Some writers rejoice in paradox. One thinks perhaps of Oscar Wilde or G. K. Chesterton. And one thinks especially perhaps of Shakespeare. *King Lear* is almost defined by the paradox of foolish wisdom, and it is Hamlet who says that he must be cruel to be kind.

Another person who rejoices in paradox is Jesus. What, for instance, is one to make of his assertion that “the last shall be first, and the first last”? Isn’t this arrant nonsense? A logical absurdity signifying nothing?

Leaving aside the meaning of the paradox as it is used by Jesus in the parable of the vineyard workers, it can be seen that this apparent contradiction not only points to a deeper truth but that, indeed, it is the paradoxical truth at the heart of every human heart. In our relationship with ourselves and in our relationship with others it is invariably true that the last shall be first, and the first last.

If a man puts himself first in his marriage, his marriage will not last. If he puts himself first and his wife second, he will not have a wife for long; if indeed, with such a self-centred attitude, he can find a wife in the first place. In putting his wife first, his marriage lasts, which means, paradoxically, that he is far better off being last than he would have been being first.

The paradox that “the last shall be first” points to a second paradox that “it is better to give than to receive”. The truth of this paradox is that we receive much more when we give than we would have done if we hadn’t given. It is in giving that we receive. That’s the paradox.

The tragedy of our present culture, and of every culture which forgets the “foolish wisdom” of these paradoxes, is that we are making ourselves miserable by trying to put ourselves

first. The plague of modernity is alienation, the sense of hopeless isolation that we feel when we are unable to transcend ourselves by forming meaningful relationships with others. We live in a culture in which we cannot form lasting relationships, condemning ourselves to loneliness or to a string of short-lived romances that fizzle out as quickly as they were set aflame. We think that love is a feeling to be gratified and not a self to be sacrificed. The irony is that the one seeking to be gratified is never satisfied, whereas the one who lays down his life for the beloved receives much more than he gives.

Our culture is one in which the alienated self, wearing his Pride with pride and rejoicing in the spirit of his own self-centredness, is condemning himself to a life of loneliness, squatting in the shriveling hovel of his ego, which gets smaller and smaller the more that he allows it to grow. In putting himself first, he finds himself at last in the hell that he has made *for* himself, which is nothing other than the hell that he has made *of* himself.

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