

Hunger for joy: All will be well

September 4, 2007

*All will be well,
And all will be well,
And all manner of things will be well.*

—Julian of Norwich

We read, C. S. Lewis says in *Shadowlands*, to know that we are not alone. We read because we want to know if there is a reason to believe. Sometimes when we read, someone names a truth that resonates so deeply inside us that we find ourselves laughing or crying because we never knew there was a name for what we had hoped.

One of those passages, for me, comes at the end of G. K. Chesterton's book *Orthodoxy*. It is a picture of God and the destiny of his creation that is so good we can hardly hope it will be true. It produces maybe a sliver of what happened to the disciples after the resurrection, when, we're told, "they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement" (Luke 24:41).

I believe because the hunger for joy will not go away. The hunger does not prove that joy (or God) exists. But it is suggestive. It would be an odd world if creatures had thirst but there was no such thing as water, or appetite but there was no such thing as food, or a craving to mate but there was no such thing as sex.

I believe because if what Jesus taught is true, then joy is at the core of the universe. If Jesus was wrong, if unbelief is right, then joy and the hunger for it are an accident. Then the earth is a ball of dirt and water floating for a few seconds in a cosmic chamber destined to perish when the Big Bang collapses in on itself. "What is it all but a trouble of ants in the gleam of a million million suns?" asked Tennyson.

If Jesus is right, joy was at the beginning, was challenged in the middle and will be restored at the end. If he was wrong, joy is a momentary illusion that was absent in the beginning and will soon be forever stilled.

I believe Jesus was right. I believe joy is as real as Cleveland.

Orthodoxy closes with a picture of Jesus and the hope of joy that still slays me when I read it—especially the last line, and the last word. But it requires a little context, so I'll try to set it up.

Imagine you had a five-year-old child whom you loved very much. Let us say this child had been sick; you were afraid you might lose her. Then the doctors told you she could have an operation. It is in fact a very simple one—like having her tonsils out. It would be without risk. She will live, they say. She'll be fine. Your joy knows no limits.

But your five-year-old child is scared to death. She is dreading the operation. She is frightened by the surgeon. She does not know that all will be well. You try to reassure her, but she doesn't understand. So you don't let her see the lightness of your heart. You can't joke around. You can't laugh. She would think you did not care. You must take her fear seriously. You must let her know that you empathize.

But every once in a while, you have to leave her sick room. You have to be able to laugh and dance. Because you know all will be well.

What if the human condition is something like this? What if Julian of Norwich was right? One person heavily influenced by the Jesus tradition long ago said that one day "God will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

What if that's actually the way things are going to be? What if all things are going to be well? What if Jesus knew this?

Everything would have looked different to him. Then God would be the parent, and we would be the five-year-old in the sick room. God would have to accommodate himself to us; he'd have to knit his brow and nod his head and take our fear seriously. But every once in a while God would have to excuse himself just to go outside and laugh.

Now here are the final words of Chesterton's book:

Joy, which was the small publicity of the pagan, is the gigantic secret of the Christian. And as I close this chaotic volume I open again the strange small book from which all Christianity came; and I am again haunted by a

kind of confirmation. The tremendous figure which fills the Gospels towers in this respect, as in every other, above all the thinkers who ever thought themselves tall. His pathos was natural, almost casual. The Stoics, ancient and modern, were proud of concealing their tears. He never concealed His tears; He showed them plainly on His open face at any daily sight, such as the far sight of His native city. Yet He concealed something. Solemn supermen and imperial diplomatists are proud of restraining their anger. He never restrained His anger. He flung furniture down the front steps of the Temple, and asked men how they expected to escape the damnation of Hell. Yet He restrained something. I say it with reverence; there was in that shattering personality a thread that must be called shyness. There was something that He hid from all men when He went up a mountain to pray. There was something that He covered constantly by abrupt silence or impetuous isolation. There was some one thing that was too great for God to show us when He walked upon our earth; and I have sometimes fancied that it was His mirth.