



A MAGICAL UNIVERSE

A Renovare Devotional Classic

Sunday January 20 @ 10:00 am in the Great Hall

Epiphany Seattle Spiritual Formation Forum

Introduction to the Author

Gilbert Keith Chesterton (1874 – 1936) was one of history’s most prolific and thoughtful writers. He was a successful illustrator, playwright, novelist, poet, literary critic, essayist, lecturer, and editor. He was, by the age of sixteen, a confirmed agnostic. He began developing his own private philosophy through cold logic and keen observation. He was surprised to discover that his own beliefs coincided with “orthodox: (classic, correct, historically consistent) Christianity.

In 1922 Chesterton converted to Roman Catholicism and became one of its champions. He has been called the “prince of paradox” because his richest insights are often hidden beneath a light, energetic, and whimsical style. Chesterton wrote studies of Browning (1903) and Dickens (1906) as well as several novels including *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* (1904) and *The Man Who Was Thursday* (1908). He also wrote the well-known Father Brown detective series.

The following excerpt is taken from his book, *Orthodoxy*. It is a profoundly incarnational selection (Chesterton was a profoundly incarnational person) focusing as it does upon the glory of the created order. In it Chesterton writes about his childhood (i.e., pre-

Christian) beliefs about the universe, namely, that the universe is magical. By magic Chesterton is not referring to pagan beliefs, but rather, to the idea that the universe is alive and has meaning. This is in contrast to the prevailing notion posited by scientific materialism, the belief that the universe is nothing more than carbons and atoms, random and without purpose. When Chesterton later became a Christian, he discovered that his childhood views about the created world were closer to reality than the beliefs held by modern culture. For Chesterton, the universe is a divine wonder, a jewel to be treasured because Someone (God) is constantly charging it with power and grandeur and meaning.

Excerpts taken from *Orthodoxy*

1. A False Assumption

All the towering materialism which dominates the modern mind rests ultimately upon one assumption; a false assumption. It is supposed that if a thing goes on repeating itself it is probably dead; a piece of clockwork. People feel that if the universe was personal it would vary; if the sun were alive it would dance. This is a fallacy even in relation to known fact. For the variation in human affairs is generally brought into them, not by

life, but by death; by the dying down or breaking off of their strength or desire.

A man varies his movements because of some slight element of failure or fatigue. He gets into an omnibus because he is tired of walking; or he walks because he is tired of sitting still. But if his life and joy were so gigantic that he never tired of going to Islington, he might go to Islington as regularly as the Thames goes to Sheerness. The very speed and ecstasy of his life would have the stillness of death. The sun rises every morning. I do not rise every morning; but the variation is due not to my activity, but to my inaction.

2. *Heaven's Encores*

Now, to put the matter in a popular phrase, it might be true that the sun rises regularly because he never gets tired of rising. His routine might be due, not to a lifelessness, but to a rush of life. The thing I mean can be seen, for instance, in children, when they find some game or joke that they specially enjoy. A child kicks his legs rhythmically through excess, not absence, of life. Because children have abounding vitality, because they are in spirit fierce and free, therefore they want things repeated and unchanged. They always say, "Do it again"; and the grown-up person does it again until he is nearly dead. For grown-up people are not strong enough to exult in monotony.

But perhaps God is strong enough to exult in monotony. It is possible that God says every morning, "Do it again" to the sun; and every evening, "Do it again" to the moon. It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike; it may be that God makes every daisy separately, but has never got tired of making them. It may be that He has the eternal appetite of infancy; for we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we.

The repetition in Nature may not be a mere recurrence; it may be a theatrical encore. Heaven may encore the bird who laid an egg. If the human being conceives and brings forth a human child instead of bringing forth a fish, or a bat, or a griffin, the reason may not be that we are fixed in an animal fate without life or purpose. It may be that our little tragedy has touched the gods, that they admire it from their starry galleries, and that at the end of every human drama man is called again and again before the curtain. Repetition may go on for millions of years, by mere choice, and at any instant it may stop. Man may stand on the earth generation after generation, and yet each birth be his positively last appearance.

3. *Repeated Exercises of Someone's Will*

This was my first conviction; made by the shock of my childish emotions meeting the modern creed in mid-career. I had always vaguely felt facts to be miracles in the sense that they are wonderful: now I began to think them miracles in the stricter sense that they were *willful*. I mean that they were, or might be, repeated exercises of some will.

In short, I had always believed that the world involved magic: now I thought that perhaps it involved a magician. And this pointed a profound emotion always present and sub-conscious; that this world of ours has some purpose; and if there is a purpose, there is a person. I had always felt life first as a story: and if there is a story there is a story-teller.

But modern thought also hit my second human tradition. It went against the fairy feeling about strict limits and conditions. The one thing it loved to talk about was expansion and largeness. Herbert Spencer would have been greatly annoyed if anyone had called him an imperialist, and therefore it is highly regrettable that nobody did. But he was an imperialist of the lowest type. He popularized this contemptible notion that the size of the solar system ought to overawe the spiritual dogma of man.

Why should a man surrender his dignity to the solar system any more than to a whale? If mere size proves that man is not the image of God, then a whale may be the image of God; a somewhat formless image; what one might call an impressionist portrait. It is quite futile to argue that man is small compared to the cosmos; for man was always small compared to the nearest tree.

4. *The Universe Is a Priceless Jewel*

Stories of magic alone can express my sense that life is not only a pleasure but a kind of eccentric privilege. I may express this other feeling of cosmic coziness by allusion to another book always read in boyhood, "Robinson Crusoe," which I read about this time, and which owes its eternal vivacity to the fact that it celebrates the poetry of limits, nay, even the wild romance of prudence.

Crusoe is a man on a small rock with a few comforts just snatched from the sea: the best thing in the book is simply the list of things saved from the wreck. The greatest of poems is an inventory. Every kitchen tool

becomes ideal because Crusoe might have dropped it in the sea. It is a good exercise, in empty or ugly hours of the day, to look at anything, the coal-scuttle or the bookcase, and think how happy one could be to have brought it out of the sinking ship on to the solitary island.

The trees and the planets seemed like things saved from a wreck: and when I saw the Matterhorn, I was glad that it had not been overlooked in the confusion. I felt economical about the stars as if they were sapphires (they are called so in Milton's Eden): I hoarded the hills. For the universe is a single jewel, and while it is a natural cant to talk of a jewel as peerless and priceless, of this jewel it is literally true. This cosmos is indeed without peer and without price: for there cannot be another one.

The Magic Has a Meaning (and Someone to Mean It)

I felt in my bones; first, that this world does not explain itself. It may be a miracle with a supernatural explanation; it may be a conjuring trick, with a natural explanation. But the explanation of the conjuring trick, if it is to satisfy me, will have to be better than the natural explanations I have heard. The thing is magic, true or false.

Second, I came to feel as if magic must have a meaning, and meaning must have some one to mean it. There was something personal in the world, as in a work of art; whatever it meant it meant violently.

Third, I thought this purpose beautiful in its old design, in spite of its defects, such as dragons. Fourth, that the proper form of thanks to it is some form of humility and restraint: we should thank God for beer and Burgundy by not drinking too much of them. We owed, also, an obedience to whatever made us.

And last, and strangest, there had come into my mind a vague and vast impression that in some way all good was a remnant to be stored and held sacred out of some primordial ruin. Man had saved his good as Crusoe saved his goods: he had saved them from a wreck. All this I felt and the age gave me no encouragement to feel it. And all this time I had not even thought of Christian theology.

Bible Selection: Psalm 104:1-13

Praise the LORD, my soul.

LORD my God, you are very great;
you are clothed with splendor and majesty.

²The LORD wraps himself in light as with a garment;
he stretches out the heavens like a tent
³ and lays the beams of his upper chambers on their waters.

He makes the clouds his chariot
and rides on the wings of the wind.

⁴He makes winds his messengers,^[a]
flames of fire his servants.

⁵He set the earth on its foundations;
it can never be moved.

⁶You covered it with the watery depths as with a garment;
the waters stood above the mountains.

⁷But at your rebuke the waters fled,
at the sound of your thunder they took to flight;

⁸they flowed over the mountains,
they went down into the valleys,
to the place you assigned for them.

⁹You set a boundary they cannot cross;
never again will they cover the earth.

¹⁰He makes springs pour water into the ravines;
it flows between the mountains.

¹¹They give water to all the beasts of the field;
the wild donkeys quench their thirst.

¹²The birds of the sky nest by the waters;
they sing among the branches.

¹³He waters the mountains from his upper chambers;
the land is satisfied by the fruit of his work.

Reflection Questions

1. What is the "false assumption" Chesterton exposes?
2. What does Chesterton mean when he writes that God is like the child who each day says to the sun and the moon, "Do it again?" Why is this so significant in our understanding of the created world? How does this contrast with the modern view of scientific materialism?
3. How do you understand his statement, "It may be that He [God] has the eternal appetite of infancy; for we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we"?
4. Have you ever had an experience, like Chesterton's, in which you suddenly saw that the created world is a "priceless" jewel?

5. According to Psalm 104, every part of creation – from the majesty of the mountain to a donkey quenching his thirst in a river – is the work of God. Do you have this ability, when you look at the natural world, to see God behind *everything*? Are there things that prevent you from seeing as the Psalmist did?

Suggested Exercises

1. As you read the paper or watch television, pay attention to how little moderns regard the created world.
2. Find a modern science textbook. As you read it, note how devoid it is of a sense that the world we live in has any meaning or purpose. See if you can even find any reference to meaning or purpose. The utter lack will help explain why we find it hard to see the world as Chesterton did.
3. Go in your backyard, or a park, and simply observe. As you look at these living creatures (trees, grass, stones) think of what Chesterton said, that each blade and leaf and pebble is what it is because God made it. The leaf is not green by necessity; God tells it to be and keeps telling it to be. Practice seeing the world in this way.
4. Meditate on Psalm 104:1-13, closing your eyes and seeing each aspect of creation the psalmist describes. As you do, pray simply, “That, too, Lord, is the work of your hand.”

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Epiphany Parish is place where belonging takes precedence, and relationship is primary – relationships between individuals and their own innate gifts, among people, and between people and God

Epiphany Promises You

Belonging over believing
Relationship is primary
Doubt is welcome
Conversion-free zone
No obligations, fees or expectations

Contact Us

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