

The Four Last Things, I

We could argue about what is the greatest poem written in the history of Western Civilization, but I would put my money on *The Divine Comedy*, by Dante Alighieri. It is not easy to say what the Comedy is about, since as Anthony Esolen noted, it is in fact about everything that has meaning in human life. Dante casts himself as the main character, but not as a wise teacher nor as an exemplar of virtue, but as a man who is lost in sin, who has strayed from the path that leads to heaven. It is obvious when you read the Comedy that he is a great poet, a brilliant man, but in the end he is everyone of us. To read the Comedy, is to read about ourselves.

Why is it called a comedy when it begins with vivid descriptions of the sadness of being lost and the punishments of the damned? It is because Dante is using the word in the classical sense; a comedy being a story which begins in sadness and ends in joy, as opposed to a tragedy which begins in joy and ends in sadness.

I want to use this great poem not only to introduce my parishioners to it presuming that some if not many have never read it, but also because I want to preach on the Four Last Things. And I want to use Dante because, as G. K. Chesterton once said, "*The Divine Comedy* is St. Thomas Aquinas in verse." He's right; Dante was quite a student of St. Thomas, and is a thoroughly medieval man. So when you read him, you absorb the thought of St. Thomas on a poetical level.

The opening lines are (in the Lawrence White translation) "Midway upon the journey of our life I found that I was in a dusky wood; for the right path, whence I had strayed, was lost." How did he get lost? There is no introduction for this; we are simply and suddenly in a dark wood, a savage wilderness with no story as to how we got there.

"How I arrived there, it were hard to tell, so weary was my mind, so filled with sleep, I reeled and wandered from the path of truth." What kind of sleep is this that makes a man wander from the path of truth? It is the sluggish torpor of sin, which makes the intellect cloudy and enfeebles the will. He comes to his senses and tries to climb up again to the mountain of God, but blocking his path is a leopard, a lion and a ravenous she-wolf. These represent the world, the flesh and the devil. They are every sin.

And he knows that he cannot overcome them. "The she-wolf stood beside him, gaunt and grim, whose leanness showed her hunger unappeased, though many she had caused to live in woe. So heavily she bore my spirits down with terror which her very aspect caused, that I lost hope of making the ascent."

That is everyman. He is frozen with fear to overcome his sins. And so he cries out for help. This too is the cry of everyman. It is the cry of the man who keeps committing the same sins over and over and over and over again; the man who makes no headway against his anger. He not only lets the sun set on his anger, he lets months and years and decades go by. It is the cry of a man who makes no headway against his sloth, but is as lazy as he was years ago. It is the cry of man enslaved to the passions of his flesh. The sinner is stuck and knows it. He wants to change at some level, but does not. And fear is there, even great fear because he realizes that he has abandoned God by his repeated sin.

But God has not abandoned him. He sends Dante help, but to Dante's surprise the help is arranged by a great Lady in heaven, and the help is a pagan, the greatest of pagan poets, Virgil. Encouraged, Dante thinks that surely, a man as wise as Virgil will know the way around the beasts to get back to climbing upward. Indeed Virgil does know the way. But it is not by getting back on the same path and trying to ascend. Rather, the only way out of this predicament for Dante is down and in; down that is, down into the depths of hell, so that he may see sin for what it really is, and learn of its punishments. Virgil says,

I shall be your guide to lead you hence through that eternal place where you shall hear despairing cries of woe, and see the ancient spirits in their grief proclaiming they have died a second death.

Dante fears this, since his spirit has been bruised by cowardice, "which many a time so weighs a man's heart down it turns him from a glorious enterprise." Yet Virgil reminds him that he, Virgil, has been sent by a great Lady in heaven who heard his cry. "A Lady Most Compassionate, in heaven takes so much pity on this man's sad plight that she assails the cruel decree from on high." And she not only makes issue with the cruel decree of the beasts blocking the path, but enlists other help for Dante. "She sought Lucia, and addressed her thus, 'Your faithful one is now in need of you, and I commend him to your loving care.'" So St. Lucy, Santa Lucia, the patroness of Dante's beloved Florence, is also with him, moving him away from the savage beasts, giving him strength of heart to go on the journey with Virgil.

Quickly they set off, and quickly they come before an enormous gate, immensely wide, hewn of mountain-sized stones, and Dante rightly quails before this gate. For above the gate inscribed in gigantic, frightening script were the words

THROUGH ME LIES THE ROAD TO THE CITY OF GRIEF.
THROUGH ME LIES THE PATHWAY TO WOE EVERLASTING.
THROUGH ME LIES THE ROAD TO THE SOULS THAT ARE
LOST. JUSTICE IMPELLED MY MIGHTY ARCHITECT: THE
POWER DIVINE, AND PRIMAL LOVE AND WISDOM
SURPASSING ALL, HAVE HERE CONSTRUCTED ME. BEFORE
I WAS CREATED, NOTHING WAS SAVE THINGS ETERNAL. I
SHALL LAST FOREVER. ABANDON HOPE, ALL YE WHO
ENTER HERE!

That – as the saying goes – says everything. He sees the gate with his own eyes, he reads the words and knows at some level that they are true, but he cannot comprehend what he has just seen. And in this too he is everyman.

I mean, when we think of evil men, who come to mind, 20c dictators and serial killers? Or a 4c priest named Arius, who denied the divinity of Christ and ruined men's belief in the Holy Trinity? When St. Thomas Aquinas needed an example of continuing evil, he chose Arius, because the errors of that heretic will go on hurting the faith of men until the end of time. And his inheritor, Mahomet, has poisoned the faith of billions with the same errors, and shall go on doing so until the end of time. And for those who will not repent of these ugly and malevolent heresies, they shall be poisoned for all eternity.

Yet still, as we shall see, still Dante agrees that yes, sure, there must be punishment. But for all eternity? It is the eternity of the decrees of God that makes him balk. And not just him, but most men cannot really believe in eternity, especially an eternity of punishment. Dante sees with his own eyes the gate of hell, the words that justice impelled God to make hell, and that is it constructed with primal love and wisdom. But for now he cannot believe that love has anything to do with hell. This too is everyman.

My brethren, when we pray the Creed, and profess that we believe in the life everlasting, what that means is not only everlasting life in heaven, and it also means eternal living death in hell. And we pray this not because we are already convinced necessarily, but we pray the Creed as a supplication for Faith, like St. Augustine prayed, "Lord, I do believe. Help thou my unbelief."