

A Brief for the Defense (1 Thessalonians 5: 15-22)*Pentecost XI*

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A Brief for the Defense

Sorrow everywhere. Slaughter everywhere. If babies are not starving someplace, they are starving somewhere else. With flies in their nostrils. But we enjoy our lives because that's what God wants. Otherwise the mornings before summer dawn would not be made so fine. The Bengal tiger would not be fashioned so miraculously well. The poor women at the fountain are laughing together between the suffering they have known and the awfulness in their future, smiling and laughing while somebody in the village is very sick. There is laughter every day in the terrible streets of Calcutta, and the women laugh in the cages of Bombay. If we deny our happiness, resist our satisfaction, we lessen the importance of their deprivation. We must risk delight. We can do without pleasure, but not delight. Not enjoyment. We must have the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless furnace of this world. To make injustice the only measure of our attention is to praise the Devil. If the locomotive of the Lord runs us down, we should give thanks that the end had magnitude. We must admit there will be music despite everything. We stand at the prow again of a small ship anchored late at night in the tiny port looking over to the sleeping island: the waterfront is three shuttered cafes and one naked light burning. To hear the faint sound of oars in the silence as a rowboat comes slowly out and then goes back is truly worth all the years of sorrow that are to come.

Jack Gilbert

A Brief for the Defense. Would you take it on? You're a barrister, just say, and you're the one called to mount the argument that the world is a good world despite the ill in it. You're the one asked to defend not only the possibility but the God-ordained necessity of enjoying life. Would you wig up and head to court? Or would you think it a lost cause, and cop a plea?

In this amazingly arresting poem, Jack Gilbert takes on the case. The one bringing the charges against joy – the accuser – is suffering; suffering in all its ubiquity and all its forms, from sorrow, slaughter and starvation, to poverty, illness and demeaning exploitation. How can any of us permit ourselves to be happy in a world like this; how can we enjoy our lives while others undergo this pain? These are serious charges and Gilbert doesn't soften their hard edge – in fact, he heightens their impact by juxtaposing the shocking image of babies starving 'with flies in their nostrils' with the bald assertion that God wants us to enjoy our lives. Really? Can that be true? If he's going to convince us of this, Gilbert is going to need some significant witnesses for the defense. Over the course of the poem, one by one, he brings them forth.

First, he elicits the testimony of beauty – 'the mornings before summer dawn' that are 'made so fine' and the Bengal tiger 'fashioned so miraculously well'. They're reasons, aren't they, to believe we're made for delighting? Next, the poet draws our attention to the witness of laughter and community – the poor women laughing together at the fountain, the laughter that rings out every day in Calcutta, as well as the laughing of the caged women in Bombay. He points to the testimony of music – since he thinks anyone must admit that music will persist 'despite everything'. And finally, Gilbert calls to the witness stand the wondrous and radical preciousness of the ordinary. His final argument before he rests his case for the goodness of things presents a scene from his own life, the night passage to the Greek island of Santorini where he lived for many years. The poet makes us present to a small ship anchored at a tiny port, the waterfront with its shuttered cafes and one naked light, and the faint sound of oars in the silence, and these motions and sights and sounds evoke

such tenderness for the wondrous 'is-ness' of things that it's almost too much to bear.

This, then, is the brief for the defense – the grounds on which the poet seeks to uphold the case for joy and enjoyment, despite the manifold suffering of life. Does it succeed? Are we persuaded? Does it convince the jury in us?

Gilbert realizes that his witnesses – beauty, laughter, music and wonder – will have to withstand tough cross-examination. So he sketches at least the outline of a rebuttal argument. Imagine you're the opposing counsel. One objection you might raise is to do with the balance between joy and pain, the extent to which there is adequate redress or compensation. It's true – you might concede – there is laughter; but the question is whether it's enough. The poor women at the fountain laugh together only ever *between* and in the midst of suffering – 'between the suffering they have known and the awfulness in their future', and even while someone else in the village is very sick. Laughter may be present but it doesn't eliminate the suffering. Yes, Gilbert says, but nor does the suffering eliminate the laughter. Laughter may not be total but nor can it ever be totally eclipsed.

Very well, then, here's a second objection. You talk about enjoying our lives because of the fine summer dawns and the splendour of the tiger, but how can we enjoy ourselves while we know someone is dying on the terrible streets of Calcutta and the women are locked in cages? How callous would that make us? How guilty do we feel? Yes, Gilbert says, but if we deny the happiness that is available, if we resist the satisfaction that's possible – we don't help them. In fact, 'we lessen the importance of their deprivation' because we human beings are made for joy, and if we pretend we can do without it then we diminish the significance of their loss. And what's more, if we make injustice the only measure of our attention, we praise the devil – we strengthen the darkness.

Hmmmm - maybe. But try getting out of this one ... you talk about having the 'stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless furnace of this world', but that's the point. It is a ruthless furnace, and some day if we aren't already there, we'll find ourselves burning in it. Won't it hurt more if we've let life in, relaxed our guard,

dared enjoyment? Won't we be better off not to tempt fate, not risk too much and certainly not risk delight? Well, says Gilbert, it's true you can't possess or guarantee gladness – it may be as ephemeral as the faint sound of oars in the silence, as fragile as 'a small ship' anchored in the vastness of the ocean at night. But bloody hell – this is your one life, it's your chance. And if the locomotive of the Lord runs you down, why not give thanks that the end had magnitude? Isn't letting the joy in, that fragile, ephemeral delight in our fragile, ephemeral world – isn't that 'truly worth all the years of sorrow that are to come'?

Well, it's a brief for the defense. It's not an open and shut case. In the end, we have to make a judgement, we have to choose how we'll live. And for all the metaphors of legal argument, courts and witnesses, this is not a choice ultimately that can be determined by weighing the pros and cons, as Jack Gilbert knows very well. Rather it's about whether we're willing to accept the whole of it – to be present to the depth of sorrow *and* the gift of joy, to let go self-protection so as to let in both the pain of suffering and the risk of delight.

This isn't easy, we know, especially when we're hurting or grieving or afraid. But just as Gilbert insists on the necessity of joy – 'We can do without pleasure', he says, 'but not delight. Not enjoyment', so too our faith tradition insists that enjoyment is the true end of human life. The 'chief end of humanity', says the Westminster Catechism of 1647 'is to glorify God and to enjoy God forever'. How we do that, says theologian Jürgen Moltmann, is to rejoice in who God is and to enjoy our own existence. For how can we glorify and enjoy God, unless we take joy in the gift God has given? 'Joy', he writes, 'is the meaning of human life, joy in thanksgiving and thanksgiving as joy'. Or, as Julian of Norwich, expressed it: 'Of all the things we may do for [God] in our penitence, the most honoring to Him is to live gladly and gaily because of His love'.

How do we do this? How do we enjoy – when so much of our lives can feel consumed by anxiety, loneliness and consciousness of the world's suffering, or just a sense of dull routine and dissatisfaction? Well – the Scriptures testify that joy is what happens in us when God is near, when we are present to the presence of God. Jesus

came to his disciples, he said, 'so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete' (Jn 15:11). Sometimes being present to the presence of God, available for joy, means staying close to our pain – neither repressing nor indulging it but simply being with it, until we find ourselves breaking through unexpectedly into life; sometimes it means entering into the poverty of pure prayer – empty and receptive; and sometimes we're just surprised by joy as we catch a glimpse of summer dawn, or hear – as Neil and I did on the Camino recently – church bells ringing up the valley from a small village in the mountains of central Spain.

The experience of joy is always gift, grace – we cannot force it. But it's a gift we can refuse. And that means it asks something of us – a kind of presence and daring and commitment. We must have the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless furnace of this world, says Jack Gilbert; indeed, we must make it a practice, says St Paul writing to the small, persecuted church of the Thessalonians to 'Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you'.