

GOD AS POET: TRUTH, GOODNESS AND BEAUTY

The following is an excerpt from the Headmaster's address at the 32nd Convocation held on Sunday, August 14. To listen to the full audio version, click on www.newcovenantschools.org.

In his letter to the Ephesians St. Paul makes the statement that “we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” In this single statement St. Paul announces the beginning and the end of man, his origin and his purpose, or what we refer to as “telos.”

The word translated as “workmanship” brings to mind the activity of a craftsman, and the verb form of this work means to make, or to do. Used here it indicates a “making,” and it is this word that comes directly into the English language as our word “poem.” For us a poem is a literary “making,” a manipulation of language into pleasing patterns, meters or rhyme schemes. Good poems obey the rules while capturing and expressing emotions or profound realities.

God as Maker, or, if you like, God as poet, has created us in Christ Jesus, and he has created us for doing our own good works. Our existence has its beginning in Christ, and our end or purpose is to achieve the good. Here, in just a short statement we have discovered one of what we call transcendentals. In our tradition we speak of three transcendentals. You know them as truth, goodness and beauty. We embedded them into our Portrait of the Graduate: A New Covenant Graduate is a lover of truth, goodness and beauty.

If something is transcendent, it is ultimate. It exists and it is pursued for its own sake. There is no further end beyond it. It is not a means to an end or of utilitarian value. It is valuable in and of itself. It is objective and exists outside of us. These three are fundamental to reality because they are properties of God himself. God doesn’t just know truth, he is truth itself; God doesn’t just do good things, he is goodness itself; God doesn’t just have beauty, he is beauty.

Truth, Goodness and beauty are expressions of the divine nature and they characterize the world he made – his creation, his making, his poem. Fundamentally, what it means to be human is simply this: humans are ordered to communion with reality. We are made for the world as it is. In fact, truth, goodness, and beauty are three separate ways in which the reality of God’s world is apprehended. When these are present in our lives we say that we are achieving the fullness of human flourishing. The late Roger Scruton, English philosopher says:

The experience of beauty, for example, tells us that we are at home in the world, and that the world is already ordered in our perceptions as a place fit for the lives of beings like us. Our need for beauty is not something that we could lack and still be fulfilled as people. It is a need arising from our condition. We can wander through the world alienated or we can find our home here, coming to rest in harmony with others and ourselves.

If we live in a world that is fixed and stable, a world that is fundamentally ordered by truth, goodness, and beauty, it should be perfectly obvious that the education of children should follow a

path driven by a pedagogy that precisely matched what a young human being requires to achieve the fullness of life. It should be a pedagogy of truth, goodness and beauty.

Truth answers the question, what should I know? The pedagogical means to getting there initially is through feeding the child’s natural proclivity to wonder and curiosity. When we learn the truth, we say that we have overcome ignorance. Good teachers to do this. Good teachers are always interesting people. Pursuing truth is an avenue to pursuing God.

Goodness answers the question, what should I do? What kind of actions do I pursue. A human being created in Christ Jesus is designed for doing the good. Thus, we train children in moral virtues. Where would we find those? At New Covenant we start with the Ten Commandments. When we act in goodness, we say that we have overcome vice. Acting well, doing good, is an avenue to pursuing God.

My colleagues and I spent a great deal of time during in-service reflecting on this third one, the beautiful. This responds to the question, what should I love? Or what should I desire or enjoy? At this point, many folks might take a knee and just say, you know, beautiful things are nice, but they tend to be expensive. Beauty is optional. We say no. Nurturing and satisfying the innate desire for beauty is fundamental to education because it is fundamental to flourishing human beings.

It is often the case that something that is beautiful has no practical value, and because of that, it is not necessary. Truth, Goodness, and Beauty are, in the end, identical, being separate ways in

which a single, positive reality is rationally apprehended. They are like the fingers on your hand, each a distinct digit, but ultimately connected at the base. Put another way, if you strive for truth and goodness, but believe for whatever reason that beauty is optional, you have betrayed the former.

There are more reasons to press the point. As post-modernity has progressed we are witnessing a surge in individualism and relativism, a worldview that embraces truth-to-me as normal and which is as individuated as individuals themselves. It is as though each individual is his own story. It installs individual utility deep within as the controlling commitment to self-fulfillment. It is not too surprising to discover that students wired this way are not hostile to faith because they are no longer threatened by its exclusive claims. It simply doesn't matter that your truth claims conflict with mine.

It is precisely this controlling attitude that is resistant to the older conventions of rationality and logic, the bedrock of classical apologetics. It's not that Lewis' arguments in, say, *Mere Christianity*, are

not sound, it's just that no one cares any longer. Culture has moved students deeper into the realm of the affections, the desires, the loves, well beneath the head. Success in our endeavor will require us to aim lower. We must adjust to the fact that education is a process of formation – in-formation – a task that is concerned with shaping a kind of person.

Such a process requires us to intrude into the realm of the imagination, the desires, the affections. A student will grow up to be what he wants to be. That is, he will likely obey his strongest desires, which is why education must seek to cultivate proper notions of beauty – that which should be desired. We become what we love, and what we love is not shaped by mere cognition. The competition for the affections are stronger than ever before, given that technology so powerfully privatizes the world of the individual and caters so powerfully and precisely to the individuated desires of the consumer.

I don't make my living criticizing other schools, public or private, but I will say this. Our society is being stampeded – perhaps by a minority – but by a strong

current that is in denial of reality. Truth has fallen in the street. Pursuing the good especially for others has been replaced with narcissism and self-love. And beauty has been replaced with the ugly, in our architecture, in our art, in our music, in our movies. Our children have been manipulated to love these things. I can assure you that the false, the bad, and the ugly is loose and running rampant in public education here and across the country.

If you wished to summarize a classical, Christian education in just a few short words, you could characterize it as a pursuit of the good, the true and the beautiful. This is a cord of three strands that is not easily broken. Today, students are told that they are not God's making, God's poem. They are their own self-written poem, free to re-structure God's poem as they wish. Let us remember that as children of God's making we are created to pursue the good, the true and the beautiful