

## A reflection on Browning's "Christmas Eve"

Christmas Eve, 1849, England. A cold, wind-whipped pedestrian seeks refuge from a rainstorm by slipping into the back of a stone chapel during a sermon. A mere nine people are listening to the preacher, whose logic and grammar are abysmal. The poet, already cynical about the holiday, pours out on paper a storm of questions as blustery and biting as the storm outside.

I have learned that not all cynics are denying the goodness of God. Some, in fact, are truly hungry for good and are asking why people are so bad at making God known. Sometimes the answers are surprising.

Robert Browning's lengthy poem "Christmas Eve" is not an easy read, but for me it is a profound one. Unlike the heart-warming nostalgia, comical myths, and trite moralizing that dominate the Advent season in our culture, Browning's poem is a challenging but honest battle through inner cynicism about the God of the Bible. (Thanks to Project Gutenberg I found a free copy on iBooks. It fills about 70 pages in verse.)

As Browning's story flows, he hungers for glory, but he sees no sign of it in the pathetic little church. Bitter at the apparent shallowness of the worshipers, he turns in disgust back out into the rain, but his questions continue. What is the relation, if any, between God's good news and man's deplorable presentation? More to the root, what is it the soul craves, even though we fail to grasp it? Truth must remain true, no matter how badly we perceive it and describe it. If eternal glory exists, we all, at best, are only beginning to take it in.

The poet recalls his youthful awareness of the power and love of God. He finds God's limitlessness undeniable, but sees that each of us struggles to come to grips with it in our own ways. He recounts vivid experiences of awe, but confesses frustration that he is unable to reproduce them. He begins to be humbled by the awareness that everyone God loves worships inadequately. God can grace even the most unimpressive worship.

The poet has a vision of Heaven and struggles to describe the indescribable. Because God's glory is infinite, each of us becomes fascinated with a mere fragment of creation. We devote ourselves to something that we can never bring to completion.

But, now sitting on his college steps, he realizes his educators tried to reduce the eternal to mere myth. He recognizes that their arguments attack human failings. But unintentionally, they implied a true ideal from which we have fallen. If good God did not exist, why would we be so offended that this world fails to reflect the goodness of God? If Christ had not come, we would have to invent him, since nothing else in our experience adequately fills our longing for true goodness. Why focus on the inadequacies alone? The very idea of good calls for our praise.

Although writing in the mid-1900s the poet sounds very 21st-century when he sees that he has settled for leaving each person to believe what they like about "the general Father." But we don't experience true Goodness as a generality. The best experiences of it ache to be shared with others. He moves from the "lazy glow of benevolence" to see that God, being distinctly good, is specific, and it is God's specific goodness we are compelled to share. No speck of creation fails to call forth wonder at its glorious Creator.

Carried along by the overwhelming grace of such a God, the poet finds himself back in the little chapel, seeing the same shabby congregation and hearing the same inarticulate preacher. But now he is not looking down on them; he is seeing God's grace trickling in this poor stream from a limitless, eternal spring. He now hopes that everyone railing against man's inadequacy may be led to the Christ who is inadequate in nothing. And if any man should be offended by his story, he concludes:

"I praise the heart, and pity the head of him,  
And refer myself to THEE, instead of him,  
Who head and heart alike discernest."

"Christmas Eve" brings comparisons to mind. CS Lewis' "The Pilgrim's Regress" is an allegory of his own journey away from God into atheism and back again to a more joyful faith. Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol," written only a few years before Browning's poem, describes another conversion with a different focus.

Dickens' Scrooge starts as a melodramatic villain, so we distance ourselves from him until we feel something of his humanitarian transformation at the end of the story. Dickens' agenda was political, aimed at his opponents. He doesn't lead us to the root problem. Browning does: it is our bitterness toward God. He speaks to those who question not only themselves, but the very idea of a good worth living for. Browning is testifying to his own struggle and his reawakened awareness of the God who never went away.

That awareness of the eternally good God who reconciles us in Christ Jesus changes how he sees the people in the little nonconformist church. "So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer" (2 Corinthians 5:16). The root of selfish disdain is not merely in Scrooge's love of wealth; it is in our lost awareness of eternal Good.

I confess I had to read the poem three times to finally grasp what he was saying. His Victorian vocabulary had me feeling as sluggish as our ESL students must feel. But his honest questions kept drawing me back. Like Browning, I see plenty to be cynical about--in the world and in churches. But cynicism is not a destination. It is, as Browning shows, a pain prodding me to ask what is wrong--but also to clarify the ideal from which "wrong" is deviating. His journey and mine look a lot alike.

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