

Ens Et Bonum Convertentur (To be is good)

by Chris Brown

What if I were to tell you that you are the light of the world and the salt of the earth, and that by saying this you knew that what I meant is that the very essence of you is good? Most likely you would be sheepish if not outright denying a sense of your own goodness.

If you profess to be a Christian you might especially deny this proclaiming that no one is good and only in Christ one might deem to have any sense of self-worth or esteem. You might maintain this despite that it was the Christ spoken of who uttered the words regarding salt of the earth and light of the world to an array of people as broad and diverse as any, from those called (self-righteous) Pharisees to those deemed sinners.

This raises the question of how do I have a good sense of myself when something very strong inside me says not to, and this sense is commonly reinforced by theology (eg doctrine of sin) and liturgy (eg 'We are not worthy to come to your table..').

Firstly some psychological theory. If I came into life 'In love with the world', as Margaret Mahler said, then I have an ecstatic sense of being me, or in modern parlance a healthy self-esteem. If this doesn't remain intact, and it doesn't, then what happens?

What happens is the two great crises that every young life has to go through. One is separation from Mum, and two is the Oedipal stage where insecurities around Dad also arise. To cut a long story short, that sense of these others who I was sure thought the world of me now give me a sense of 'I am not so sure they think of me so wonderfully'.

This is more than a sense of 'I am not much good'. This is the deeper sense of 'It is not all that good to be me'. Sebastian Moore (Let This Mind Be In You, The Quest For Identity From Oedipus to Christ) says, "This starts the habit of seeing myself in terms of others, of rating myself in the eyes of others, of measuring myself by others". This is low self-worth and at its worst self-hate. If we don't get past this we will spend a life time trying to get our sense of worth from anywhere else than from within our self.

David Schnarch (Constructing the Sexual Crucible) called all this other-validation and contrasted it with the necessity for self-validation. Self-validation is not simply acknowledging some good things about me, but that it is good to be me. Or as the philosophical title to this essay has it, 'Ens et bonum convertentur' meaning 'to be is good'. I am means I am good. No greater sense of self-esteem or worth can be had.

For many Christians this will raise theological questions around sin and redemption. In terms of this essay sin is saying no to that sense of myself as good. When we say no to this good sense of self we deny God who has created us out of desire and hence good and desirable. Once we do this we commit all manner of sins as we search for other-validation to fill the void left by our poor sense of self.

Redemption is then the grace to reconnect with that initial sense of, 'I am good, and it is good to be me'. As if to say, 'I am the light of the world, the salt of the earth', or, as I like to put it, 'I am infinitely loveable and worth dying for'.

As I see it the great problem for many Christians is to continue to confuse other-validation with self-validation. How often will someone speak of God/Jesus loving them warts and all, and essentially meaning that they see themselves as unworthy and unlovable, but God/Jesus magnanimously loves them anyway.

This, to me, is other-validation and other-validation divine or otherwise will never do. As Moore said, "If you do not believe in yourself as a flaming miracle, how can you believe in God – except in a way that is going to make you and everyone else miserable?"

I have often been asked, 'How do you develop a good sense of yourself? Do I go to the mirror several times a day and say something self affirming?' I suppose you could do this but I tend to ask people how did you stop feeling good about yourself? What happened? What did you do? If you stopped then what were the dynamics of how you felt good about yourself when you did? What can you do to reconnect with this? What is the alternate story about you even, if we have to go way back to your first week of life, when you entered the world kicking and screaming essentially saying, 'Here I am and bring it on.'

In the 13th century Meister Eckhart suggested that we think less about what we do (doing and other-validation) and more about who we are (being and self-validation) and that out of this all manner of good things would flow.

I have long thought how our lives would be if we saw ourselves as the beloved of God, a God who infinitely loves us because we are infinitely lovable. A healthy self-esteem would certainly issue forth. We might even agree that, 'I am the light of the world, and I am the salt of the earth'.