

The Better To See You With, Dear World

(Written under the influence of bagpipes,
though not without some difficulty)

Robert W. Bertram

[Sermon preached at Concordia Seminary Chapel, May 6, 1969]

The First Meditation

Pastor: Let's hear it for the world.

People: The well-turned ankle

And the well-turned urn

And the well-turned ode

upon the well-turned urn-

Enjoy them all!

Why not!

Why not,? There are reasons why not, good and valid reasons. The enjoyable world is not so automatically enjoyable as all that. Oh, I admit what we just sang (Paul Gerhardt giving us the words)-

For in all things I see traces

Of his tender love to me (TLH, 25)

and another thing he wrote and we sing:

The shining jewels cover

The heavens boundless blue. (TLH, 554)

But I know, too, there's another side to the story, another side to the world.

'And another Paul-not Gerhardt this time but the apostle (one of our better Christians). So far as I can tell, this Paul could ride across the wide blue Mediterranean and never get carried away by it or break into song. Granted, he did write the Corinthians,

There is one glory of the sun, and

another glory of the moon, and

another glory of the stars; for star

differs from star in glory. (I Cor. 15:41)

But that is spoken like a professor. It hardly has what you might call zazz.

One thing I'll never forget he did say:

My desire is to depart and be
with Christ, for that is far better.
(Phil. 1:23)

That hardly sounds world-affirming. And come to think of it, that other Paul-Gerhardt,
that is-could feel the same way:

There's nothing here that tempts me
To wish a longer stay,
So I must hasten forward,
No halting or delay. (TLH, 586)

Couldn't he make up his mind? Cantate, indeed! But which lyrics shall we sing?

So what to do with the world? Ought we love it? Or leave it? The answer is Yes. Does it
delight? Or repel? Yes. The same world in both cases? In both cases the same world. I
John 2:15. "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world." But John 3:16.
"God so loved the world"

Ah, but there's the secret. What makes the world lovely, altogether lovely, is not its own
loveableness but the way it is getting loved. Its beauty is relative, but relative to what is
absolute: the cherishing Father. And with what a passion! The passion and death of his
only Boy. He cared enough to send the very best. After that, how could the world ever
look ugly?

I once stood in front of Michelangelo's David, along with the rest of the tourists in
Florence, paying what I thought were suitable respects. But when I turned to leave, I
found myself face to face with a man who had been standing behind me--a young,
handsome, Jewish-looking man, himself a bit of David. He was entranced by the piece to
the point of tears. I knew by that I had missed something and I went back for a second
look. It is that way with the world. Its beauty is in the eyes of its Beholder, who "so loved
it" Because he did, the only reason for leaving it is to get closer to where he is, to see
it the way he does--"the better to see you with, dear world."

(The first five lines of The Alleluiatic Sequence)

The Second Meditation

Pastor: Let's hear it for the world.

People: The well-turned ankle

And the well-turned urn

And the well-turned ode

upon the well-turned urn-

Enjoy them all!

All, what?

All of it, the way God loves it all-in mercy. Even the fallen world? Sure, what other world is there? What other world does he love that way? Even the world under the curse, with all its blight and grime and reeking death? Of course, for into what other world but this did the dear Christ come, "under the curse"? To be sure, the curse is dark and deadly. But with him "under the curse" it turns transparent, for those who have eyes to see. Who needs theologia gloriae, unless you can't stand the world? Theologia crucis can stand it, and more than stand it, even revel in it-at wedding-feasts in Cana, at food and drink with publicans and sinners. The cross – that is the crux of the enjoyable world. Remember, my dear Tituses, "To the pure all things are pure." (Tit. 1:15) But "all things."

But man, ugly man--isn't he the exception? Without him messing up the world, the rest of it – the world of nature – would be easy enough to look at. So thinks every pietist. Greenland's icy mountains? They're grand. India's coral strand? That's not bad either. But "only man is vile." Maybe, maybe not. One thing is sure: man, even the vilest man, whether or not he gets along with "mother Nature," is still precious to the Father. Just ask The Elder Brother. And that makes every man my brother – if not yet in fact, at least in hope. Where there is faith there is hope. "From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view." (II Cor. 5:16) Paul said that, and so can we. Look, family, the Father has brought us a new baby brother – billions of them.

Goethe tells of a novel he read about a leper. "Even the touch of the book suggested to him the danger of contagion." (Ewert's The Christian Ethos, p. 316) Sick people and dead people filled him with revulsion. It was not that way with our Lord. He knew how to look at lepers and the blind and the cripples, and fondly he touched them. It was Christ-like of Dostoevsky to find a kinship in the tramp, the prostitute, the criminal. It is Christ-like of you to see in every brother – every brother and every even ill-turned ankle, urn and ode – the prospect of the Resurrection, and to enjoy the anticipation. "On a clear day you can see forever," my little Christs – the better to see you with, dear world.

(Lines 6 through 10 of The Sequence)

The Third Meditation

Pastor: Let's hear it for the world.

People: The well-turned ankle
And the well-turned urn
And the well-turned ode
upon the well-turned urn-
Enjoy them all!
Who, we?

Yes, we – we and all the other members of the Body of Christ. Whatever organic function of that Body you ordinarily perform – whether as its arms or feet, its stronger parts or weaker parts – you are also its eyes and ears. And as this new Body of Christ

steps in for the old body the world, and assumes anew those functions that old body now has forfeited, so you are now the eyes and ears vicariously of the whole blind and deaf and weary world. Where its vision has dimmed, you will have to do its seeing for it. Where it has lost its hearing, you must do its listening. Man was meant to be the eyes and ears of the creation, but he has given up on that. He has lost sight and sound of its grandest delights and has reduced them instead to something merely to be photographed or calibrated or bull-dozed. Recover them again, you eyes and ears, and celebrate their forgotten joys with the New Song. For if folks like you wouldn't hear the Father's reconciling Word and see his hand in every turn of ankle, urn and ode, then who in the world will?

Richard Caemmerer, Jr., the artist, once patiently explained to me that painters don't really study sunsets and faces and babies first of all, but first of all – so as to see these things – they study other painters. Please, do that for the world, will you? Be its painters through whom it once again can find its tints and tones and symmetries. Be the world's avant garde, its eschatological merry-makers. Step in for "thunders echoing loud and deep," the "days of cloudless beauty, hoar frost and summer glow," the "birds with painted plumage gay" and do for them what they've been waiting for-their alleluias to the Three in One. Let' hear it-for the world.

(Please rise for the last five lines of The Sequence.)

Robert W. Bertram
Concordia Seminary Chapel
May 6, 1969