

Foundations Class Part 2: Echoes of a Voice

Review

The Drama of Scripture & The Gospel

In Part 1, we walked through the four-part story that God is writing: Creation, Fall, Redemption & Restoration. We examined each of these by exploring the four primary relationships that each of us have with: God, ourselves, each other and the world. We saw that God is on a mission and that His Gospel is comprehensive. The comprehensive Gospel is this: In Jesus Christ, God takes his creation—which has, because of sin, fallen into ruin—and redemptively restores it in every part, until the time of consummation, in which all things will at last be made new. It is this Christ-centered, comprehensive, and restorational gospel that should animate the life and witness of the Christian church.

Echoes of a Voice

In Part 2, we will take a step back and look at four areas of our contemporary life that point towards *something*. What that *something* is is not immediately clear to everyone - but we can perceive that there are clues ingrained into the fabric of the universe and our lives that act as “strang signposts - pointing beyond the landscape of our contemporary culture and out into the unknown.”¹

These four signposts are things that we all have in common, they are echoes that every human being can hear. They are: the longing for justice, the quest for spirituality, the hunger for relationships and the delight in beauty.

¹ NT Wright. *Simply Christian*. xi.

Putting the World to Rights

The Cry for Justice

Where is justice? How can we get it? How can we put things right? And, in particular, how can we stop injustice from happening again?”²

Fighting injustice can feel like playing a tragic game of whack-a-mole: you try to stomp out injustice in one place only to find it popping up again in another. And if we're being totally honest, this is not only true out there in the harsh cruel world, it's also true inside of us. No matter what you believe, you share the common human experience of violating your own beliefs.

“The line between justice and injustice, between things being right and things being not right, can't be drawn between us and them. It runs right down the middle of each one of us. The ancient philosophers, not least Aristotle, saw this as a wrinkle in the system, a puzzle at several levels. We all know what we ought to do (give or take a few details); but we all manage, at least some of the time, not to do it. Isn't that odd?”

Isn't it strange that there is an entire species that all desire things to be different and yet are not only incapable of bringing about global change, are unable to even bring about personal change?

A Voice or a Dream?

There are three basic ways of explaining this:³

1. This is merely a childish dream. It has absolutely no bearing on reality and we just need to get over it. Nietzsche and Machiavelli were right. There is no hope.
2. This is a dream - but a true dream of a different world where we really belong. Our hope is really to escape from this world into a better one.
3. This is an echo - an echo of a voice saying that things like justice are actually good and that we ought to live in a just world. The voice whispers hope for *this* world.

This third explanation - that our deep longing for justice is the echo of a voice - fits within the story that Christians believe about the world.

“The Christian faith endorses the passion for justice which every human being knows, the longing to see things put to rights. And it claims that in Jesus, God himself has shared

² Ibid. 7.

³ Ibid. 9.

this passion and put it into effect, so that in the end all tears may be dried and the world may be filled with justice and joy.”⁴

Christians & Justice

Of course, over the centuries, many so-called Christians have not only abandoned working for justice, they have - in fact - visited injustice in some truly awful and violent ways. One thinks of the crusades and the Spanish Inquisition. However, when these and other atrocities are lined up against the historic beliefs of Christianity - it is quickly seen that these people were deeply confused about what the Christian faith is all about. Additionally - we must remember that “it is no part of the Christian belief to say that the followers of Jesus have always got everything right. Jesus himself taught his followers a prayer which includes asking God for forgiveness. He must have thought we would go on needing it.”⁵

But for every shameful story of injustice, there are whole fistfulls of stories of justice enacted in the name of Jesus. William Wilberforce and John Woolman made it their life’s business to stop the slave trade. Martin Luther King Jr. gave his life campaigning for racial justice. Desmond Tutu worked tirelessly and non-violently to bring about the end of Apartheid in South Africa. Dietrich Bonhoeffer died in a concentration camp for seeking to undermine the Nazi regime. Mother Theresa labored for the right of the poorest of Calcutta to die peacefully and quietly. These people understood their work for justice as flowing from their faith in Jesus.

Christians believe that all humans have heard, deep within themselves, the echo of a voice which calls us to live like that. And they believe that in Jesus that voice became human and did what had to be done to bring about true justice.⁶

Notes:

⁴ Ibid. 12.

⁵ Ibid. 12.

⁶ Ibid. 15.

The Hidden Spring

Thirsty for Spirituality

The hidden spring of spirituality is the second echo - the second signpost pointing away from the bleak landscape of modern secularism and toward the possibility that we humans were made for more than this.⁷

The philosophies of our day seek to make us materialists by default and to make religion a safe, quarantined sub-department of ordinary life. Picture this: if spirituality is like streams and rivers and lakes and waterfalls - all bubbling up from the bedrock, the philosophy of the day has sought to pave the world over in concrete. It still allows drinking fountains and the occasional private pool membership - but the waters of spirituality are to be contained and regulated and minimally dispensed since (we are told) most of us would like to live unbothered by the unpredictable waters of spirituality.

“Millions in the western world have enjoyed the temporary separation from ‘religious interference’ that this philosophy has brought. Millions more, aware of the deep subterranean bubblings and yearnings of the water systems we call ‘spirituality,’ which can not more ultimately be denied than can endless springs of water under thick concrete, have done their best secretly to tap into it, using the official channels (churches and other public places of worship), but aware that there’s more water available than most churches have let on. Many more again have been aware of an indefinable thirst, a longing for springs of living, refreshing water that they can bathe in, delight in, and drink to the full.”⁸

What Makes Us So Thirsty?

What are we to make of spirituality as we listen for the echoes of a voice that might be addressing us?⁹

Potential Explanations:

1. Spirituality is the echo of our own voice. It is the projection of our internal desires on the external world. This is often heard in the statement, “Your faith is true for you, but not for me.” This person is saying that what’s happening inside of you is genuinely happening - but it has no bearing on external reality. This person is

⁷ Ibid. 20.

⁸ Ibid. 19.

⁹ Ibid. 24.

Made for Each Other

Jack Johnson, slightly-melancholy-surfer-musician, wrote a song called “Better Together” with these words,

“Love is the answer. At least for most of the questions in my heart.

Like: "Why are we here?", "And where do we go?", "And how come it's so hard?".

It's not always easy, And sometimes life can be deceiving

I'll tell you one thing: It's always better when we're together.”¹⁰

He’s on to something here - two somethings actually. He rightly tapped into groundwater truth - that human beings are made for each other. He’s also rightly found that being together is hard.

The Puzzle of Relationships

Isn’t it strange how we ache for one another and yet relationships are undoubtedly one of the most complicated and difficult aspects of life?

“We are made for each other. Yet making relationships work, let alone making them flourish, is often remarkably difficult. That is the same paradox that we uncovered in the previous two chapters. We all know that justice matters, yet it slips through our fingers. We mostly know that there is such a thing as spirituality, and that it’s important, yet it’s hard to refute the charge that it’s all wishful thinking. In the same way, we all know that we belong in communities, that we were made to be social creatures. Yet there are many times when we are tempted to slam the door and stomp off into the night by ourselves, simultaneously making the statement that we don’t belong anymore and that we want someone to take pity on us, to come rescue and comfort us. We all know we belong in relationships, but we can’t quite work out how to get them right. The voice we hear echoing in our heads and our hearts keeps reminding us of both parts of this paradox, and it’s worth pondering why.”¹¹

“From the most intimate relationship (marriage) to those on the largest scale (national institutions) we find the same thing: we all know we are made to live together, but we all find that doing so is more difficult than we had imagined. And it is within these settings, large and small, but particularly at the most personal and intimate end of the scale, that we

¹⁰ Jack Johnson. *Better Together*.

¹¹ NT Wright. *Simply Christian*. 30.

find the natural setting of those characteristics signs of human life: laughter and tears. We find each other funny. We find each other tragic. We find ourselves, and our relationships, funny and tragic. This is who we are. We can't avoid being this way.”¹²

In Part 1, we examined the Christian story about our relationships with one another. How we are made for each other - made for intimacy and delight. How the rebellion of human sin has estranged us from one another - and now we are suspicious, guarded and manipulative with one another. But, we talked about how, because of the death and resurrection of Jesus the way is paved for us to be reconciled to one another and to now relate to each other as family members. And one day, when Jesus makes all things new, we will be restored to full intimacy and delight and trust in our relationships.

This, of course, is not the only explanation for the present joy and pain in human relationships. There are other stories that could be believed:

Example: Human beings long for relational connection because as creatures we must reproduce for the sake of our species. However, males are wired to reproduce as broadly as possible while females must carry a pregnancy to term and then raise a helpless child. This is a difficult task and so females desire to males to be monogamous while males desire to be polygamous - chaos and heartache ensue.

If this explanation seems laughable in this context - remember that this was, and in some places still is, the dominant explanation for human relationships. However, as you may have already guessed, this explanation is weak when it comes to explaining the joy of friendships or the pain of losing a friend that brought no economic or evolutionary gain.

So we do indeed know that we are made for relationships and that we find relationships difficult, we see this double knowledge as a further signpost pointing in the same direction as the two we have already examined. The call to relationship, and the sad rebuke for our failures at it, can be heard together as echoes of a voice. The voice is reminding us of who we really are. It may even be offering us some kind of rescue from our predicament.¹³

Notes:

¹² Ibid. 33.

¹³ Ibid. 38.

For the Beauty of the Earth

The fourth echo is the common experience of encountering beauty. As unique individuals, we encounter beauty in uniquely different ways - and yet the experience of being struck by the beauty of song, art, nature and each other is common to us all. Like our longing for justice, like our desire to drink from the well of spirituality, like our ache to be close with each other; we glimpse beauty and yet struggle to understand how and why it moves us. We wrestle to put our feelings into words. We strive to capture beauty, to bottle it, lock it down so that it may be analyzed - but we fall short. And yet, despite our shortcomings, beauty still remains one of the most powerful forces in our lives. It is an echo - sometimes loud and sometime soft - that will not go away. Even the most disillusioned cynic can still be undone by the colors of Autumn or the voice of a singing child.

The Transience of Beauty

Have you ever arrived home after attending a concert and tried to describe it to someone who was not there? It's impossible! Even the pictures we snap or the videos we take still somehow do not really capture the beauty how it *felt* to sit on the shores of the Atlantic ocean and watch the sunrise.

Beauty is transient - and in more than one way. Centuries ago, mountains were not considered beautiful, but rather dangerous and fearsome. Today we consider more slender human body forms to be beautiful, but rewind the clock and a more full-figured form was considered desirable. And we all know, some more than others, that the beauty of youth fades.

Beauty and Truth

Life is not so simplistic that we can get away with saying things like, "beauty is in the eye of the beholder" or "beauty is truth and truth beauty."¹⁴ If beauty were hidden in the beholder's eye, then truth would be merely a way of talking about the inner feelings that went along with it. And that simply isn't how we normally use the word "truth."¹⁵

Because beauty cannot be fully captured or bottled or pinned down - because we cannot, with any specificity, nail down exactly what *it* is. We must understand it as an echo - not the voice itself.

¹⁴ John Keats. *Ode on a Grecian Urn*.

¹⁵ NT Wright. *Simply Christian*. 43.

Thus Christians believe that one can glimpse the beauty of God in nature, but nature is not God. Sexual intimacy gives us a glimpse of the kind of intimacy one can share with the Trinitarian: Father, Son & Holy Spirit - but we do not worship sex. Beauty is a signpost that invites us “further up and further in.”¹⁶

Beauty is compelling in a very strange way that, at times, overwhelms the rest of the mind and body - goes beyond the senses and points towards something transcendent. What is happening here?

Beauty and God

It's as if, in moments of beholding true beauty, we are glimpsing glory. But whose glory? Christians believe and proclaim and sing that the glory belongs to God. It is his glory that we hear when the symphony swells and crescendos. It is his glory that we see in the faces of children and grandparents who are delighting in one another. It is his glory that we feel when we float in the ocean and feel the power of a wave roll beneath us.

And when textbooks and professors and documentaries remind us that symphonies only last a few minutes and then the feeling is gone, and families are filled with dysfunction and emotional abuse and ocean tides erode shores and tidal waves destroy cities... Then we do not give up on beauty - but rather remember the story. That God made the world a beautiful place, that sin has stained and twisted the world into ugliness and violence, that Jesus - the one who is truly beautiful - has come to restore the lost beauty of our world, and that one day what we only now hear as an echo and glimpse as a vapor we will someday hear and see in mind-blowing fullness.

The Glorious Complexity of Life

You may be wondering why we spoken of justice, spirituality, relationships and beauty - but not truth. Isn't this a class about the Foundations of the Christian Faith? Don't Christians claim to know what is true?

The answer is yes - and it is a simple but not simplistic “yes.” Life is gloriously complex. In world with music, and beehives, and sex, and calculus, and internal combustion engines, and space travel, and dating, and college football, and cuban sandwiches... we need answer that take the complexity of the world into account - nothing simplistic will do. You are the kind of person who likes to shrug your shoulders and begins a sentence with, “well, it's just _____” then I hope you feel gently and lovingly challenged by

¹⁶ CS Lewis. *The Last Battle*.

Assigned Reading: Part Two | Staring at the Sun, p. 55-140 in *Simply Christian*.

For Further Reading

Journey Towards Justice | Nicholas Wolterstorff

The Justice Calling | Hoang & Johnson

The Meaning of Marriage | Timothy Keller

Johnathan Edwards & the Trinitarian Shape of Beauty | John Cunningham