

‘We would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep,’ St Paul told the Thessalonians, ‘that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope’ (1 Thess. 4:13 - *ut non contristemini sicut et ceteri qui spem non habent* in Latin translation). The injunction seems ambiguous. Are we – unlike others – not to grieve for the dead? Or should our grief have a character unlike that of others?

There have been strong Christian voices which advocate the first reading. St John Chrysostom, commenting on this passage, argues vehemently against rationalisations of mourning. They all indicate a lack of trust in God, he thinks. Certainly it is understandable that, when the good news of the resurrection had revolutionised the significance of death, Christians should think that mourning had become a thoroughly inappropriate response to Christian death. That the New Testament calls death a ‘falling asleep’ – even in the case of Stephen as he was stoned – is no mere euphemism. Chrysostom was surely not wrong when, in another sermon, he identified the use of ‘sleep’ to name death as a usage indicative of a complete change in death’s character.

And yet. The Apocalypse tells us that every tear will be wiped away. It does not berate us for having shed them. Other Christian thinkers, notably including St Augustine, have thought that there is a place for Christian mourning, but it is given a fundamentally different orientation by the hope of the resurrection.

It is not surprising that that most humane of thinkers, St Thomas Aquinas, takes the latter approach in his commentary on the letters to the Thessalonians. ‘The Apostle seems certainly to grant that there should be sorrow for the dead, but he forbids something, that is, that the grief be inordinate.’ He then goes on to give four reasons for legitimate mourning, and explains that it is moderate in the light of the hope of the resurrection.

Having been unable to consult other contemporary Dominican or Parisian commentaries on 1 Thessalonians, I do not know whether Thomas as he lectured simply said what everyone at the time said on this verse. However, I do not think he would have said it unless he meant it, and therefore it seems worth placing these comments in the context of his thought in order to mine their riches.

The vocabulary of ‘sorrow’ and ‘hope’ sets this little exposition in a specific area of St Thomas’s thought. We are in the realm of the *passiones animae*, which are the movements of the sensitive appetite. That apparently abstruse statement is simply a shorthand which indicates the framework of Thomas’s account of human affectivity – ‘feelings’.

*Passiones animae* can be translated as ‘emotions’, although this would mislead if we took St Thomas to hold all the assumptions often concealed in modern usage of the word. Literally, *passiones animae* are ‘passions of the soul’; and ‘passions’ – the opposite of ‘actions’ – are literally ‘undergoings’, things in which we are more ‘acted upon’ than ‘acting’. The soul here is not the soul as opposed to the body, but the soul precisely as the principle of life in a bodily creature. The *passiones animae* concern animals, including human beings, though like all ‘animal’ aspects of our life, in human beings they have a specifically human character, as we will see.

Emotional life is characterised by St Thomas in terms of response: responses to things perceived as good or bad, and responses which involve bodily change. ‘Appetite’ in Thomas’s vocabulary does not just mean a desire or ability to consume. It is the name for a faculty which is fundamentally a capacity for attraction to a good, a capacity which includes the whole range of responses to things considered as good (desirable) or bad (undesirable). That includes, then, not only *wanting* some good thing, but also the state of rest in the presence of the good, and reactions to the absence of good, notably that particular sort of non-good we usually call bad or evil. There are also responses to a good in terms of the easiness or difficulty of attaining that good; or, conversely, the easiness or difficulty of avoiding an evil. The ‘sensitive’ appetite is such a faculty for response on the level of our senses, our

bodies. We are all aware at least sometimes of bodily aspects to our feelings. If we anticipate a good meal, contemplate something beautiful, or see someone we love, we may be aware of what it does to our heart rate or breathing; certainly if we are afraid or angry, we will be all too aware of physical sensations. We are used to gauging how other people feel from their appearance, to the extent that people can be almost literally radiant with happiness. (It's interesting that Edith Stein argued that we don't just see *signs* of grief, for example, on someone else's face; she thought it more true to say that we really do see someone else's grief. I'm not sure that this argument is absolutely sustainable, but it is certainly suggestive.)

Thomas discusses particular passions under nine headings: love, hate (love's opposite), desire (including its contrary, aversion), pleasure, pain (including sorrow), hope (including its opposite, despair), fear, daring and anger. I think we can take this as a fundamental framework for analysis of the emotional life; it does not restrict the vocabulary we will need to use to describe emotional nuances, but it does give a powerful way to investigate what is going on. Love is the most basic passion, and the root of all the rest. Thomas describes it as *complacentia* in some good, a word which is very difficult to translate. Eric D'Arcy offers 'a sense of affinity' or 'sense of attractiveness'. It's some sort of recognition that something is good *for me*. From this basic pull towards the good, all the other passions may follow depending on circumstances. Sorrow is the sort of interior pain produced by the presence of what is bad or evil, or the absence of a good.

These feelings are on one level also identifiable in other animals, of course. You will know if your dog or cat is happy or sad. If you study sea-anemones or bees you can presumably also get to know their characteristic responses to good or bad experiences. Human beings, however, are unlike other animals. We are not *only* bodily creatures. We also have a non-material, spiritual existence. We are a union of the material and spiritual. Our awareness of and responses to things are not only on the bodily level. As well as our exterior senses and the interior processes which deal with their results, including memory and imagination, we can think on a purely non-material level, the truly intellectual level. This is what makes conceptual thought possible for us: we don't just see, taste or touch what is here and now, and we don't even just have a sort of storage of sense-data in our memory. We can conceptualise oranges as such; we can also detach the idea of the orange's colour from that of its size or taste; and so on. We don't just engage with this or that good; we can grasp the good *as such*. Ultimately, this non-material, spiritual level of our being opens us to the possibility of communion with God, who is pure spirit.

Our perception of what is good and desirable, therefore, does not just operate on the level of bodily perceptions, and our response to the good (or bad) also has a non-material, intellectual, spiritual level (those three adjectives all point to the same reality). We can have a concept of what is good, and we can choose the good precisely because it is good – not just because *this* or *that* thing is viscerally attractive. By contrast with our 'sensitive appetite', as discussed above, our capacity for this spiritual response to the good is called our 'rational appetite' or 'will' – again, the word 'will' in St Thomas's vocabulary will not always mean exactly what it means in conversational modern English. Better to stick to the idea of a non-material faculty of response to the good.

Our bodily and spiritual existence is just that – *one* existence which is both bodily and spiritual. We don't live two parallel or superimposed lives as body and soul. That is why the *passiones animae* in human beings are not just the same sort of thing that they are in the other animals. The bodily element in our responses to what is good and bad is not completely detached from our intellectual perception of the good and our will's response to what is good and bad. On the contrary, there is constant and necessary interaction between 'rational' choices (meaning choices made on the spiritual level, rather than necessarily consciously reasoned-out choices), and the visceral pull which operates on the level of sense. Sorrow

properly speaking is in fact proper to human beings, thinks St Thomas – it is not just pain, not even just any sort of interior pain (also available to the purely animal imagination), but an interior pain following upon an intellectual (non-material, spiritual) appreciation of the good and its absence. Likewise, not just pleasure, but spiritual joy is possible for human beings.

The word ‘interaction’ might seem optimistic, even euphemistic, when describing the relationship between our sense-life and our intellectual or spiritual life. We have to be honest: our experience of the passions is in the first place an experience of dysfunction. In our fallen state, the attractions and repulsions on the level of sense are not always in line with what we know to be good on a higher level. It is hard to do things we quite literally don’t feel like doing. It can be all too easy to do things we *do* feel like doing even if we know they are not ultimately good for us. And there are deeper problems. I have been talking repeatedly about responding to the good and to particular goods which we perceive; but we can be wrong, disastrously wrong, in our perception of what is good. Treating something as a good does not necessarily mean that it is truly good. Without mounting a philosophical defence of that point here, I will simply note that as Christians we know that man’s true good is ultimately found in God, and all lesser goods find their place on the path towards God.

The emotions can also go wrong in themselves. The physical aspect of our responses to the good or bad can have a life of its own, so to speak: depression and anxiety are obvious examples, sorts of sorrow or fear which seem to be physically self-sustaining and overwhelming. Emotions can also be manipulated. A simple and relatively harmless example is the way that a film score ‘tells’ us how to feel about the events of the story. Many other examples are less innocent, and even the innocent ones can be matter of an over-indulgence which is not conducive to health. Newman warns against the effects of indulging in the emotional effects of reading too many novels; a certain subtlety of inner balance can be lost.

On the positive side, if we do have a right idea of the good, it is possible to educate the passions, at least to some extent. If a little effort will give you a taste for whisky, rather more effort will give you a taste for moral and spiritual goods.

This gives us a hint of the true place the emotions or passions have in a completely healthy human nature (enjoyed by none of us since the Fall, except our Lord and our Lady). A classic description of man before the Fall says that his sense was subject to his reason, and his reason was subject to God. The emotions, then, should be subject to the will. That is a rather strange and even off-putting statement at first glance. It might sound as if one is being offered an ideal wherein people make a rational decision about how to feel. I don’t think that is the picture. The thought is rather that human beings should be all of a piece in their responses to things. Our ultimate good is spiritual, and the spiritual level of our existence is supposed to be the leading element in our being. Our whole orientation, then, should be to the spiritual good. Our emotional responses are supposed to be seamlessly integrated into this orientation. For now, we probably have to struggle against our emotional inclinations in order to practise some asceticism, to do the right thing when it is costly, or to avoid succumbing to temptations. The truly virtuous person, however, simply takes pleasure on every level in what is truly good. His whole being, like iron drawn to a magnet, inclines as it were naturally to the genuine good – ultimately, to God. This is the goal presented at the end of St Benedict’s *Prologue*.

All that was intended to give us a deeper insight into St Thomas’s little discussion on sorrow occasioned by death. For this purpose, there are two crucial points to note. First, emotions (*passiones animae*) on St Thomas’s account are not just physical events isolated, as it were, within ourselves; rather, they have an object. Fundamentally, as I have said, they are *responses*. And second, they are responses to *reality*, or at least they are meant to be. If we are capable of seeking false goods, that is only a malfunction. What our emotions are *for* is to embody a fully human response to reality. Just as we are one being composed of body and

soul, our responses should happen in an integrated way on the level of both body and soul. They should express truly our true relationship to the world we encounter, considered as good or not good, in light of the truth of our nature.

Let us then return to Thomas's comments on 1 Thessalonians 4:13. Sorrow for the dead, says St Thomas, is an act of piety, *habet pietatem*, 'it possesses piety.' *Primo propter defectum corporis...* 'Firstly, because of the failure of the failing body...'

'Firstly, because of the failure of the failing body (*defectum corporis deficientis*); for we should love them [the dead], and the body for the sake of the soul. As Ecclesiasticus 41:1 says, 'O death, how bitter is your memory to a man who has peace...' Secondly, because of their departure and the separation, for this is painful for friends. As 1 Sam. 15:32 says, 'Does bitter death thus separate?' Thirdly, a death brings remembrance of sin – and Romans 6:23 says that 'the wages of sin is death'. Fourthly, because it makes us recall our own death: Ecclesiasticus 7:3, 'In it, the end of all men is warned of, and the living man things of what will become of him.' Therefore we should sorrow, but moderately...'

These four points seem both to be explaining why there is grounds for sorrow, and why such sorrow 'possesses piety'. What is piety? As a specific virtue, Thomas will discuss it elsewhere in classical terms as the duty rendered to our parents and country (ST II-II.101). In other Latin contexts it can mean 'pity', 'compassion'. Which nuance is more appropriate here? Thomas does not seem to be talking only about mourning for family members, but I suspect that the thought of doing what is fitting and just is still at the surface of the word's use here. *Tristandum*, 'one should sorrow', is his conclusion. There is indeed a time for tears. The same idea is perhaps made more explicit when Thomas comments on the Lord's tears over Lazarus (Commentary on St John's Gospel, ch. 11 lect. 5). Jesus 'disturbed himself', says the Latin idiom, *turbavit seipsum*. This 'disturbance' belongs to the human nature of Christ, Thomas concludes, and the 'disturbance' it involves 'piety from its cause, which is just; for someone is justly disturbed if he is disturbed by the sorrow and evil suffered by others.' Perhaps this comment indeed suggests to us the very close relationship between *pietas* as justice and *pietas* as compassion: it is only right to have compassion.

The context of his thinking on the emotions also points in that direction. As we have just concluded, the emotions in St Thomas's view are meant to be truthful responses to reality. When it comes to sorrow, it is genuinely appropriate to feel pain or sorrow in the face of something genuinely bad or lamentable. 'Presuming that there is something saddening or painful, it is good for someone to feel sorrow or pain concerning the present evil (*ad bonitatem pertinet quod aliquis de malo praesenti tristetur vel doleat*)' (ST I-II.39.1).

Death thus constitutes, causes or points to realities which it is appropriate to recognise as bad, as *not* good; and thus the emotional response of sorrow is also appropriate. What then moderates the sorrow? The 'hope' of the resurrection. 'And so Paul says, *...like others who have no hope*, because they believe that these failings (*defectus*) will last for ever, but we do not believe that. As Philippians 3:20-21 says, 'We await a Saviour, our Lord Jesus Christ, who will re-form our lowly body and configure it to His glorious body.' Although Thomas gave four grounds for appropriate sorrow, he only gives one for hope, and in the first place it seems to answer to the first ground of sorrow: the 'failure' of the body. In other words, he pits the resurrection head-on against the evil of death as such, the dissolution of the human being.

I think it is significant that what he mentions first is the stark reality of what death is. Being is a good in itself. As far as it goes, we could say, it is a cause for joy. The undoing of a human being, precisely as a degradation in being, seems thus *ipso facto* a cause of sorrow. Only then does Thomas point to our subjective involvement, so to speak: the loss of a friend. And then come the blunt reminders which the encounter with death issues to us: sin has caused this, the sin which still affects us; and we too will die, bringing the logic full circle.

Where Thomas (along with plenty of other Christian thinkers) departs from some of the Fathers is in this acknowledgement of the validity of sorrow even while insisting on the final power of hope. The reality of the latter does not cancel out the reality of the former. A fully human response to reality will include sorrow over what is worthy of sorrow. Thomas shows this attitude in other places. When discussing the Lord's sorrow over Lazarus, he notes that 'the Stoics said that no wise man should be sad. But it seems very inhuman for someone not to be sad at someone's death... The Lord willed to be sad, to show you that sometimes you should be sad.' [I suspect he is quoting Augustine here.] That simple 'very inhuman' tells us something about what being human involves: the natural emotions certainly retain their place in a Christian's life. The same Stoic dictum is challenged in a different context, which gives an even more forceful sense of the dignity Thomas allows to visceral pain and sorrow. In his commentary on Job, treating Job's great speech cursing the day of his birth (ch. 3 lect. 1), Thomas says, 'The Stoics said that the wise man did not feel sorrow. The Peripatetics said that the wise man does feel sorrow, but that reason moderates sorrow, and this opinion is consistent with the truth. Reason can take nothing away from our natural condition. It belongs to sense-nature to find pleasure and gladness in what is appropriate to it, and to be grieved and saddened by what is harmful to it. Reason does not remove this natural disposition, but governs it so that sorrow does not go beyond the bounds of rectitude. This opinion is supported by Scripture, which shows that Christ, in whom is all virtue and the plenitude of wisdom, felt sorrow. So Job felt sorrow after all the adversities which we have heard about (if not, he could not have exercised the virtue of patience)...' Thomas goes on to note that Job waited some time before expressing himself in speech, to be sure that he would not speak simply under the impulse of passion. And yet Job proclaims accursed the day of his birth. Thomas explains this by noting that to exist and to live is good; to exist and to live in wretchedness, however, is not good, at least in a certain way; and yet sometime to be in wretchedness may be desirable in view of some particular goal. Only reason can grasp the good which is the hoped-for result of that misery; our physical senses cannot perceive it, just as we can taste the bitterness of a medicine but only our reason appreciates that this nasty thing is actually good for us. Job, says Thomas, knew the evil he was suffering as being somehow good for him; but 'the lower part of the soul, afflicted by sorrow, was completely against this misfortune... And so, according to the lower part of the soul, whose suffering he wanted to express, Job cursed the day of his birth.' Job's apparently shocking speech, Thomas seems to be saying, was in fact a genuinely human response to a genuine reality. Job was not mistaken in feeling his suffering so deeply, and (this is the crucial part) was not wrong to express it. Yet that suffering was not the whole of Job's reality, and Job was also aware of that. On St Thomas's reading, this speech is not a comprehensive expression of Job's grasp of the situation, and it certainly isn't his final word. It is striking that this interpretation of Job effectively disagrees with St Gregory's approach to the passage. Although Gregory also thought that Job should be presumed to be speaking rationally, he thinks that parts (at least) of chapter 3 simply do not have a literal sense, but are so plainly paradoxical that a mystical sense must be sought (*Moralia* IV. Praef.3), and produces an allegorical reading which makes the curse on the day of Job's birth an unjunction against the devil (IV.i.4-5). Thomas, by contrast, can make sense of a literal reading.

If Job's speech is a legitimate expression of pain, then, when Thomas refers to 'moderate' grief he surely does not mean to exclude intense or long-term grief. He excludes, rather, the embrace of grief as the entirety of reality.

The second ground Thomas observes for mourning is the pain of separation felt by friends who must part. Friendship is a very important category in Thomas's thought. (Rather famously, he identifies charity as a unique type of friendship, the otherwise unthinkable friendship between God and man.) Thomas's thought on the Eucharist also hints at God's

own respect for our natural human feelings in this respect. In the Office he composed for the feast of Corpus Christi, he observes that the Sacrament was instituted at the Last Supper as ‘a unique comfort for those who were saddened at [Christ’s] absence’. He again characterises the disciples as ‘sad’ in his hymn *Sacris sollemniis* for Vigils: *Dedit fragilibus corporis ferculum, dedit et tristibus sanguinis poculum*: ‘He gave the meal of His Body to the weak, and gave the drink of His Blood to the sad.’ A bodily, if sacramental, presence is thus bestowed upon those for whom friendship by its nature demands bodily companionship – again, the whole human being, body and soul, is taken into account.

Our grief thus has its truth. Yet our hope also has its truth, and that is the deeper reality. Mourning is moderate not by being slight or superficial, but by being realistic with the realism of the Gospel.

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