

VINTAGE

Saints & Sinners

C.S. Lewis (1898-1963)

A University is a society for the pursuit of learning. As students, you will be expected to make yourselves, or to start making yourselves, in to what the Middle Ages called clerks: into philosophers, scientists, scholars, critics, or historians. And at first sight this seems to be an odd thing to do during a great war. ...Why should we -- indeed how can we -- continue to take an interest in these placid occupations when the lives of our friends and the liberties of Europe are in the balance? Is it not like fiddling while Rome burns?...

Human life has always been lived on the edge of a precipice. Human culture has always had to exist under the shadow of something infinitely more important than itself. If men had postponed the search for knowledge and beauty until they were secure the search would never have begun. We are mistaken when we compare war with "normal life". Life has never been normal. Even those periods which we think most tranquil... turn out, on closer inspection, to be full of cries, alarms, difficulties, emergencies. Plausible reasons have never been lacking for putting off all merely cultural activities until some imminent danger has been averted or some crying injustice put right. But humanity long ago chose to neglect those plausible reasons. They wanted knowledge and beauty now, and would not wait for the suitable moment that never come....

But since we are fallen creatures the fact that this is now our nature would not, by itself, prove that it is rational or right. We have to inquire whether there is really any legitimate place for the activities of the scholar in a world such as this. That is, we have always to answer the question: "How can you be so frivolous and selfish as to think about anything but the salvation of human souls?"I believe that our whole life can, and indeed must, become religious...if it is meant that all our activities are to be of the kind that can be recognized as "sacred" as opposed to "secular"... Before I became a Christian I do not think I fully realized that one's life, after conversion, would inevitable consist in doing most of the same things one had been doing before: one hopes, in a new spirit, but still the same things....

I spoke just now of fiddling while Rome burns. But to a Christian the true tragedy of Nero must be not that he fiddles while the city was on fire but that he fiddles on the brink of hell. There is no question of a compromise between the claims of God and the claims of culture, or politics, or anything else. God's claim is infinite and inexorable. You can refuse it: or you can begin to try to grant it. There is no middle way. Yet in spite of this it is clear that Christianity does not exclude any of the ordinary human activities. St. Paul tells people to get on with their jobs. He even assumes that Christians may go to dinner parties, and, what is more, dinner parties given by pagans. Our Lord attends a wedding and provides miraculous wine.

"Whether ye eat or drink or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God." All our merely natural activities will be accepted, if they are offered to God, even the humblest: and all of them, even the noblest, will be sinful if they are not. Christianity does not simply replace our natural life and substitute a new one: it is rather a new organization which exploits, to its own supernatural ends, these natural materials....There is no essential quarrel between the spiritual life and the human activities as such. Thus the omnipresence of obedience to God in a Christian's life is, in a way, analogous to the omnipresence of God in space....He is everywhere -- totally present at every point of space.

We are now in a position to answer the view that human culture is an inexcusable frivolity on the part of creatures loaded with such awful responsibilities as we. I reject at once an idea which lingers in the mind of some modern people that

cultural activities are in their own right spiritual and meritorious — as though scholars and poets were intrinsically more pleasing to God than scavengers and bootblacks... Let us clear it forever from our minds. The work of a Beethoven, and the work of a charwoman, become spiritual on precisely the same condition, that of being offered to God, of being done humbly “as to the Lord”. This does not, of course, mean that it is for anyone a mere toss-up whether he should sweep rooms or compose symphonies. A mole must dig to the glory of God and a cock must crow.

We are members of one body, but differentiated members, each with his own vocation. A man’s upbringing, his talents, his circumstances, are usually a tolerable index of his vocation. If our parents have sent us to Oxford, if our country allows us to remain there, this is *prima facie* evidence that the life which we, at any rate, can best lead to the glory of God at present is the learned life.

By leading that life to the glory of God I ... mean the pursuit of knowledge and beauty, in a sense, for their own sake, but in a sense which does not exclude their being for God’s sake. An appetite for these things exists in the human mind, and God makes no appetite in vain. We can therefore pursue knowledge as such, and beauty, as such, in the sure confidence that by so doing we are either advancing to the vision of God ourselves or indirectly helping others to do so. Humility, no less than the appetite, encourages us to concentrate simply on the knowledge or the beauty, not too much concerning ourselves with their ultimate relevance to the vision of God....

The intellectual life is not the only road to God, nor the safest, but we find it to be a road, and it may be the appointed road for us. Of course, it will be so only so long as we keep the impulse pure and disinterested. That is the great difficulty.... We may come to love knowledge – our knowing – more than the thing known: to delight not in the exercise of our talents but in the fact that they are ours, or even in the reputation they bring us. Every success in the scholar’s life increases this danger. If it becomes irresistible, he must give up his scholarly work. The time for plucking out the right eye has arrived. {*“Learning in War-Time” in The Weight of Glory*}

It is not so much of our time and so much of our attention that God demands; it is not even all our time and all our attention; it is ourselves. For each of us the Baptist’s words are true: “He must increase and I decrease.” He will be infinitely merciful to our repeated failures; I know no promise that He will accept a deliberate compromise. For He has, in the last resort, nothing to give us but Himself; and He can give that only insofar as our self-affirming will retires and makes room for Him in our souls. Let us make up our minds to it; there will be nothing “of our own” left over to live on, no “ordinary” life. I do not mean that each of us will necessarily be called to be a martyr or even an ascetic. That’s as may be. For some (nobody knows which) the Christian life will include much leisure, many occupations we naturally like. But these will be received from God’s hands. In a perfect Christian they would be as much part of his “religion,” his “service,” as his hardest duties, and his feasts would be as Christian as his fasts. What cannot be admitted – what must exist only as an undefeated but daily resisted enemy – is the idea of something that is “our own,” some area in which we are to be “out of school,” on which God has no claim. {*“A Slip of the Tongue,” in The Weight of Glory*}

In 1951, C.S. Lewis exchanged letters with Sheldon Vanauken, who had become a follower of Jesus at Oxford. Vanauken asks Lewis whether he should now take up theological studies and enter “Christian ministry.” Lewis replies:

On the whole, I’d advise you to get on with your tent-making. The performance of a duty will probably teach you quite as much about God as academic Theology wd. do. Mind, I’m not certain: but that is the view I incline to... Look: the question is not whether we should bring God into our work or not. We certainly should and must: as MacDonald says, “All that is not God is death.” The question is whether we should simply (a.) Bring Him in in the dedication of our work to Him, in the integrity, diligence, and humility with which we do it or also (b.) Make His professed and explicit service our job. The A vocation rests on all men whether they know it or not; the B vocation only on those who are specially called to it. Each vocation has its peculiar dangers and peculiar rewards {*A Severe Mercy*}