

A Knowledge Too Wonderful

Graduation Address to the Class of 2001, Ottawa, April 2001

DAVID D. STEWART

We are gathered here this evening as parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, siblings and cousins, friends, helpers along the early journeys, and then of course the senior learners and other senior helpers of our students' joy. This is not a typical congregation; we all have an intense feeling of participation in the lives of these "doughty dozen" students. (Or is it a baker's dozen?) While we do not want or need to lionize them as an academic equivalent to winners of the Purple Heart for bravery against almost insuperable odds, we want them to know that their climb up the mountain that leads to the more uncluttered view of God is something in which we have a *heart*-investment.

"A KNOWLEDGE TOO WONDERFUL"

Awake my soul, awake O harp and lyre, I will awake the dawn. I will give thanks to thee O Lord, among the peoples; I will sing praises to thee among the nations, for thy steadfast love is great to the heavens, thy faithfulness to the clouds.

Psalm 57

Into the faintly luminous and silent darkness of the early morning breaks the first voice of the Creation awakening to the day before it. A rising figure, tentative it may seem at first, pierces the silence, moving up by almost untranscribable intervals into the highest register, pausing, fading, then resuming its ascent with percussive trills. Then the singer revisits his opening phrase, but moves into the B section, each note shaped, perfectly articulated, liquid and golden loveliness on its upward way toward its maker, who gave the

day, loveliness invading our barely awakening consciousness with the splendour of its offering. And so he will awake the morning for us and stay at his post, in concert, so to speak, for upwards of an hour. Who is this servant of the Most High God? The little hermit thrush, almost never to be seen, tiny and drab. Yet I can hardly imagine our forest refuge in Ontario without that little friend and messenger from above, who along with his wife and children knows nothing of us who listen gratefully.

That hermit thrush is doing by a *holy gift of instinct* what it could not possibly try to do by diligence. But we are to make a joyful noise, less ornate than that of our feathered friend, but *sustained by understanding*, and leading up into greater obedience, focused by and on the mighty acts of our God and seeking to magnify his name. Let all that hath breath praise the Lord.

And so we come to this moment and this high occasion, a keenly felt privilege for me, and a joy, to be part of the unfolding conversation with God, here at Augustine College, about Him, always about Him, not us, peering into the holy mysteries of His being and ways through all of the disciplines that we explore and make our own here during these far too short months.

What we have been about will have sharpened our vision, and quickened our love, for the ways in which our gracious Lord, through the centuries and the millennia, has been coming to his creatures in guises and forms calculated to delight, to challenge, to pique curiosity, to do almost anything so as to arouse the gross and sullen mind and heart to seek after him. The

year's studies and growth have been, I believe, in no small measure a matter of trying to understand how God set out to woo his wayward people.

In his book *The Great Dance* Baxter Kruger probes the notion that just as, in St. Augustine's words, our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Him, God's heart also is restless, in a manner beyond our comprehending, until we find our way home. Our learning here this year has surely enriched, purified, and chastened our sense of how the heavens and the other participants in this enterprise, referred to in Psalm 19, are there to provoke awe and admiration, then a desire to know him, then a reaching out of the hungering heart – and then the process by which we grow, please God, bit by bit into the likeness of Christ as members of his body. After all, St. Paul described the Church simply as his body, the fullness of him that fills all in all.

God seems to be extraordinarily concerned with bodies, having created them, and thus documented his interest in our distinctness and identity. God has implanted in us the yearning to be, to be in a body, to be ourselves forever. Above all *God's life seeks embodiment* – an arrestingly blunt way of putting the doctrine of the Incarnation.

I first heard this said in connection with our need to understand how materially God is prepared to demonstrate His desire to see His people as agents of an unimaginably inclusive and glorious work of reconciliation in Jesus' name and power. What does this say about the way in which we should understand the gifts of music, art, literature, architecture, dance, as manifestations of his “bodying forth” of himself for us and our salvation?

THE BODY: WHERE GOD MEETS US

The organizing picture for my meditation this evening is furnished by Psalm 139, of which verses 1–18 follow:

LORD, you have searched me and you know me. You perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD. You hem me in, behind and before; you have laid your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain. Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; If I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide, your right hand will hold me fast. If I say, “Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,” even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you. For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!

Were I to count them,
they would outnumber the grains of sand.
When I awake, I am still with you.

“This knowledge is too wonderful for me; too lofty for me to attain” (verse 6). Does this refer to what I have discovered about God, or what He knows about me? Surely it is both, and that would be the point of the exercise. His knowing of me and my knowing about his knowing, is *one thing*, and it is firmly in his hand.

Thus it is crucially important that my response to this state of affairs be one of praise, confessing him to be as he has revealed himself to be. I am *so known* that pride or idolatry regarding any one of my so-called powers, gifts, or potentialities, is ludicrous. I can’t even hide my thoughts from him. As the police used to say to an apprehended suspect: *You may as well come quiet.*

So what we see the psalmist singing out here is more than compliance; it is praise for God and against pride and idolatry. Not a posture of retreat from the adventure of living in this world, but a firm Yes to the one who has called us into it, and thus a Yes to the tasks that we, being who each of us is, will find lying to our hands. This praise is quietly jubilant; I will praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.

I have come to view Psalm 139 as one of the many hints in the Old Testament about the meaning and purpose of the Incarnation of our Lord, “who for us and our salvation came down ...” and who also went down into the depths of hell. Is it not he of whom verse 8 says, “If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there already”? In this reading He was there at our conception, this second Adam, and thereafter at every point. Now, what kind of a god is it who could be bothered to encompass the life of his children, not as a tyrant but as lover and wooer of the soul?

St. Paul claims in Colossians 1 that in him all coherence, all that is truly a *poiema*, a fitly joined and beautiful thing, all that has meaning and purpose, has its being. So the psalmist’s cry “I am fearfully and wonderfully made, your works are wonderful,” is surely praising God’s Christ. Paul picks this up in Ephesians 2, “We are his ... *poiema*.” The necessary path, here as everywhere else in the empirical world, is from *self*-admiration and *self*-absorption to praise of the God who is there. And to the appropriate forms of engagement with the phenomena, the things, the ‘data’ of the day-to-day world. Scripture is full of his calling and not nearly so full of our answering. With this wooing, seeking God, *allurement* is not too strong a word.

Psalm 139, as we have just seen, envelops our minds in the consciousness of his loving knowledge of us. And yet all of this is ultimately not about us, at least we dare not begin to imagine that it were so. We are invited – O how we are invited, and why, and to what! But we were *made for his pleasure* (Revelation 5) and that we might *share in his delight*, swim in that river of which Psalm 36 speaks, that psalm that has to be set alongside Psalm 139. Let me quote just a few verses to alert you to this remarkable scenario of divine bounty:

How priceless is your unfailing love!
Both high and low among men
find refuge in the shadow of your wings.
They feast on the abundance of your house;
You give them drink from your river of
delights.
For with you is the fountain of life;
in your light we see light. (7–9)

Once again: we are invited, we are adopted, made children of the King of Kings; friends, but yet our status is no more a result of our deserving than our knowing is. There is a quality of divine prodigality here that should shock us with

unexpected joy. St. Jerome translates verse 8 as, “*et torrente voluptatis tuae potabis eos*” – “and with the torrent of your delight you will give them to drink.” That sounds like *drenching* as much as drinking. I want to stay with Psalm 36 for a moment. Notice several things.

It is His house, His abundance, His righteousness, His justice, His unfailing love, His wings, in which high and low (i.e., everyone who finds consolation in Him) will find their refuge. It’s all about Him. And it is He who creates the “terms and conditions” under which *any* knowing that we may experience is going to take place.

The nexus here regarding knowledge as we have been talking about it is obvious in verse 9: life is a fountain, and it is “in Him,” and at the same time it is true that to look at anything in His light is in fact to see the invisible, to see that by which one sees: *light*. Elsewhere in Scripture the people of faith were thus characterized: they endured as seeing him who is invisible, *seeing him by Him*. It sounds like the cat chasing its tail and is in fact the most sublime mystery. Paul hints at some of the same mystery in the majestic triadic exclamation of Romans 11:36 :

O the depths of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgements, and His ways past finding out! Who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been His counsellor? For out of him, and through him, and back into him are all things; to whom be glory forever.

IS ALL KNOWLEDGE PERSONAL KNOWLEDGE?

What I have been struggling to formulate for us implies at the very least that all knowledge is ultimately related to, dependent upon, the God in whom alone everything coheres and makes sense. All of this knowing, even of the most

abstract-seeming sort, if we receive it from His hands, turns out to be full of signposts that point us back to Him, and full of the raw material of a life of knowing praise, understanding faith, thinking hearts, and feeling minds. We have all been caught in the trap set for us by the academic structures of our world. It looks like this: information, bits of data, stored on the shelves of our minds with a tag which reads “*Expires not later than two days after final examination.*” I see some rueful smiles in our midst! Such institutionalized traffic in informational merchandise is just what my terms suggest – traffic in stolen goods, insofar as anything not gratefully received and then poured into the great *jubilus* rising to God is, ultimately, stolen, or to be seen as the single talent buried by the unjust steward in an act of simple-minded contempt of the mighty Lord who had entrusted it to him.

Does the term “personal knowledge” really have much to say to us?

I am struggling to give salience to the truth that since all of life is given, and we have been given all things richly to enjoy (St. Paul’s remarkable paraphrase of Psalm 36:8), we are in some deep sense also responsible for all things so entrusted to us. So *all of that knowing is at every point immediate to God*, bearing the seeds of a deeper relationship with Him, deeper appreciation of His being, richer admiration and celebration of the gift of life itself, and of being caught in the swirl of His Grace into the dance of life eternal.

I wish I could share with those of you who have not journeyed with us junior and senior learners this past academic year at Augustine College what an electrifying experience it is for an old dog like me to be amongst students like these ones here, and the ones with whom we lived and grew back in St. Stephen’s University until last year. It makes all the difference in the world whether one

is treating the place of studies as a kind of supermarket, warehouse, or as a ... – what now?? – *tree nursery*, with each of the trees fully conscious of being caught up in a process of growth, each according to its kind but all recognizable by the mystery of development into more and more of their essential being, under the hand of the orchard-keeper. This sort of image is congenial to our Lord's way of thinking – remember John 15 and the picture of the vineyard. And it helps us to remember that under God all our knowing is “organic”: it bears on our life-relationship with him at every point.

And by the same token *all knowledge is relational*. It might help if we were to bear in mind, constantly, the force attached to the unity prayed for in John 17 and its source and means – and not least, its *purpose*. That in every possible way and, I dare say, in every imaginable discipline and skill of mankind, the world might come better to see and adore the God whom we know, through whom we know, and above all, to whom we are known – and that this should be happening as a result of there being little islands of living community of faith, life, and studies shining in the dark and turbulent sea of our society. And with this we are back to the vision of Augustine College to be just that.

All this time I have been circling here around the centre of Psalm 139, it seems to me. The fundamental imagery of that psalm has to do with the utterly stunning recognition that one is *contained, gathered in, enclosed, protected by the knowing of God, i.e., God's knowing of me*. These images of protection and delimitation are wonderfully intimate, and we can with a good conscience let ourselves go, so to speak, in marveling at this state of being so known, as the psalmist does. This touches the core of what it is to live and move on God's wide earth as people

who belong there. Knowledge is for service, for community.

But for many people, and perhaps at times for some of us, a moment comes when they feel themselves standing, as it were, alone on the outermost edge of reality, and before them gapes the Open. It would be perverse to imagine the slightest wisp of praise for God in such a place, where, as down in Avernus, or where Keats's pale knight loiters, *no bird sings*.

To have seen through everything or to have been, at least in one's mind, bereft of everything familiar, so that there is no thing, not even a *thing* to rest the eyes on, is the end, a living death. It rears its head as a dominant image in – would you believe it? – the late poems of Friedrich Nietzsche, and he combines it with that of a man standing utterly alone at the absolute peak of a mountain in the deep of winter. To recycle an expression that I used somewhat as a leitmotif in these past weeks, “In the modern age, subjects remain alone with themselves. They can invent an image but it has no other truth than the one they themselves invest it with.” This is the ground-swell of our culture, but it is also the path into a glacial loneliness.

KNOWLEDGE FOR COMMUNITY

Our knowing, the knowledge to which we are called, must be experienced as the divine antidote to that bleak prospect. All of this probing of the Psalm 139 imagery is by way of reminding ourselves that in such a sense of the known self, the self is covered, contained, embraced. All things are yours, says Paul, and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's (1 Cor. 3:23). If we engaged in a little holy play with this seemingly tossed-off remark by Paul, we might say something like: Everything belongs to you, it is safe in you, entrusted to your care, but you in turn are in an

infinitely higher but not different sense safe in Christ, entrusted to His care, and he in turn in the Father.

And so you are in point of fact *not on that perilous outer edge but at the centre of reality*, by divine invitation. And we are there with our brothers and sisters, each contributing those fruits of the mind and the heart that under God have come to ripen in community, in the uniquely productive soil of a shared life.

This, once again, is surely a part of what our Lord was praying for in the Great High-Priestly Prayer in John 17. To grasp the burden of that prayer is to know that we are made for a learning experience that does not isolate acquired facts, as Little Jack Horner did with his Christmas pie, and does not allow the possession of knowledge to isolate us from our fellows, but which instead draws us into an ever more humble and charitable sharing of what we have been learning of God, from God, by God.

And so once again that marvellous doxology of St. Paul at Romans 11 shows the way: Everything out of him, and through him, and back into him, ... to whom be praise for ever and ever. Every way we turn, then, we are confronted with a fresh aspect of this transforming truth – that all knowledge, like all knowing, is such as to draw us together into life together. This quality of being will, for most of us much of the time, not be expressed in a *visible community* of life and faith and learning, such as Augustine College gives us for a training period. This is very rare, and precious beyond words. More probably we will experience that Christ-centered, Christ-shaped habit of the mind and heart in some measure of isolation, and we will have to learn to learn from him.

All of the above is surely pressing home to us the distinction between the pursuit of knowledge *as*

an instrument of self-advancement and the *diligent embracing of knowledge as God's gift and mandate* to us under the covenant of His Grace. If we miss this turn in the road, so to speak, we fall below the level of the beasts who know their master, the ox and ass who thus appropriately appear sometimes with greater prominence than the shepherds in medieval stained-glass windows of the Nativity, munching both straw and the edges of the swaddling clothes. And our little friend the hermit thrush, along with all those birds of less endearing vocal abilities such as the crow and the (non-ecclesiastical) cardinal, is also caught up in that unbearably wonderful symphony of praise called for in the last few psalms but unfortunately not yet accessible to our poor ears. "Eye hath not seen, nor ear hath heard, ... the things that God hath prepared for them that love him."

Yes, knowledge is for praise, not pride.

ACROSS THE BRIDGE OF LEARNING

Let me regroup for a moment. There is so much riding on the matter of *personal knowledge* vs. *information stored*. One of the questions that has perplexed many of us over the years, as I can see also from my students' journals this year, is prompted by a scenario that in one form or another each one of us has played out many a time. It runs like this: A man sits in his study or down by the river and writes a superb love sonnet – and then goes home and beats his wife. Or we are at a concert where Brahms' 4th symphony has been played, with that unbearably powerful section in the second movement with the cellos carrying a great singing, surging melody and the violins soaring high above, touching heaven's gates. And then we get into an argument over who let the cat out and shouldn't have, and all the magic is dissipated. How does the beauty that we can almost grasp with our hands so miserably fail to take reliable shape in my character, who

see her and long to be united with her? How can we so yearn for God and yet be so wayward when it comes to practical discipleship?

The list is endless, and each of us can fill in the blanks from his own life. How, in short, can we behold the face of Christ such that His likeness is formed in us – not, obviously, in our facial features so much as in the transforming of our entire way of being and moving through our world.

This is the sort of juncture where we begin to grasp the cry of St. Paul’s heart for knowing Christ so comprehensively and deeply that all of our powers are growing into roads leading into His presence. One of our students, Mark Mann, just a few weeks ago described the late 16th-century Italian artist Caravaggio in similar terms, as:

desperately searching for something greater than himself,... profoundly dissatisfied with himself and the world, and [knowing] that there was something transcendent in Christianity that he lacked and wanted badly. He pursued it doggedly with his brush, every painting an outpouring of longing and desperate search for ultimate Truth.... He was his own case study for the weakness of man and the hollowness of life, and he had tasted Truth enough to portray it beautifully, but he was always unable to grasp it himself, to let it change him.

We are to be renewed in knowledge and grow into the likeness of Christ, and we chafe at the failure to sweep forward to that goal. But consider 2 Thessalonians 3:5: “May the Lord direct your hearts into God’s love and Christ’s perseverance.” The King James Version translated it “patient waiting for Christ,” but the sense seems to be that Christ is patient, and Christ was patient, staying the course under the burden of

our humanity and the weight of our sin, and for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down on the right hand of the Father.

It seems to me a wonderful *obbligato* from on high, so to speak, to this melodic line of our human and often inconsolable yearning to be finally there, with him, at rest, at home in the Father’s house, and at the table of unspeakable delight. Can we doubt that he both yearned and goes on yearning, for our completion in him, for our ultimate union with him and His with us?

This reconnects us with the notion that I shared a little while ago, that *God too is restless until we are at home with him*. This is a great mystery, and wrapped in that mystery is great comfort, that our experience of the “already and not yet” is proof, bitter-sweet at times, that we are on the path of faith that leads us homeward, that all of our knowing is in part, but yet is truly knowing, for all that. And that He is its destination.

A KNOWLEDGE TOO WONDERFUL ...

Now if all of this sounds too ethereal, let us keep reminding ourselves that what lies between our present *here* and that blessed *there* is precisely that world of experience that the psalmist is describing in 139, starting with the consciousness of the self under God’s canopy of knowing care, but then moving on into the encounter with an ocean of events, information, challenges, temptations, beguiling and repelling images of the real and imagined, income tax and examinations. Under that canopy all of them, each moment, we see as being there by God’s appointment and thus there to be met, explored, learned from, and woven into the fabric that is our life.

All things are yours, in the mystery of our union with the blessed Trinity, because they are His....

May the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us,
Establish thou the work of our hands upon us,
Yea, the work of our hands, establish thou it.

Psalm 90

David D. Stewart taught the History of Art at Augustine College from 2000 until 2007 and is now retired (see the *Newsletter* [fall 2007]).