

On Hope and Ignorance: Gleanings from the Mission Field

Colleagues:

I'm this week's writer. On digging in I planned to send along some notes about a handful of items that have snagged my eye in recent months, each sparking some passing thoughts about the mentality that is either emerging or already prevails in the American mission field that most of us operate in. As it happens, I got carried away with the first of the notes, and the handful got reduced to two. See below. I'll keep the others in mind for future posts, with the continuing aim of suggesting specific points at which Christ-trusting kerygmatisms (to coin a word) would do well to direct their energies and the Gospel's gifts in our present place and moment. Your own suggestions along these lines would be heartily welcomed.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

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1. On Paltry HopeA coworker blessed me last Christmas with a novel to read as a break from the usual stuff. When I finally dug in, it turned out to be a rollicking good read with an immensely clever and inventive plot, and I recommend it heartily: *Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore*, by Robin Sloan. The blurb-meisters at litlovers.com describe it as "a gleeful and exhilarating tale of global conspiracy, complex code-breaking, high-tech data visualization, young love,

rollicking adventure, and the secret to eternal life—mostly set in a hole-in-the-wall San Francisco bookstore,” though Google’s Silicon Valley campus also figures in, as does an arcane library carved from the bedrock of subterranean Manhattan. [Amazon’s](#) current price for the paperback edition is \$8.52.

Well-written novels have always afforded a host of windows on the mindset of the place and era they’re written for, and that’s true of this one. The thirty-something American author illuminates any number of passions peculiar to his specific slice of that generation—irreligious, cyberphilic, exceedingly smart and confident about their ability to find their way in the world. And then there’s this: to the extent that the author’s voice is being heard through the novel’s protagonist and first-person narrator, one surmises a certain bemusement, not to say frustration, with people of his age and social location who continue to harbor fantasies of living forever, if only the secret for doing that were somehow to come to light.

As if, he gently snorts, there is such a secret.

And just as gently he brings his audience back to earth. An immortality there is, but only that which comes of having friends so true and good—so brilliant in their own way, and so collaborative—that they’ll abet and magnify your accomplishments, and you theirs, to the enduring benefit of future generations who will remember you in connection with them. At least I think that’s what he says. Or perhaps it’s friendship itself that lives forever as the key to happiness and success in the here and now for the lucky few who have the good fortune to find it among the odd ducks of the world. (The book teems with idiosyncratic characters who pursue their passions in shadowy places, far from the mainstream.) In any case, the

conclusion is opaque. That may well be deliberate. The author, being smart, wants to disabuse us of nonsense, though without completely disappointing us. That would be cruel, and the book aims to be anything but cruel, nor does it touch in any serious way on the cruelty of the world. As for life, its advice to readers is to make the most of it, be true to yourself, and enjoy it while it lasts.

Or, again, so I think. And thinking that, I return to another thought that has crossed my mind often in recent years, about the poverty of secular hope. There isn't much to it. I say that as somebody who, with lots of you, has been reveling again these past couple of Sundays in the exuberance of Romans 8. How is it, I wonder, that people are willing to take a pass on so enormous and bracing an expectation, all creation groaning as it "waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God," and its ensuing liberation from "bondage to decay" and the obtaining, by "creation itself," of "the freedom of the glory of the children of God." Okay, do I know what that means, in the sense of describing what it will look and feel like? No. But it sure sounds spectacular, and it sure invites me to think more highly than I usually do of those musty phrases at the end of the creed: "the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting." But the church has long since dumbbed those phrases down, hasn't it; and Christians have colluded in reducing hope in Christ to the rubbish of the afterlife as conceived in the popular imagination, a shadowy lingering on in the cramped company of dear, sweet Grandma, Aunt Sally perhaps, and hardly anyone else. Does anyone ever talk at funerals, or even over a cup of Bible-class coffee, about the astonishing prospect—the grand

adventure, to put it more exactly—of seeing God Almighty face to face and not only surviving the experience, but enjoying it as well? Of finding oneself unencumbered, once and for all, of all the garbage that gums up the arteries of body and spirit alike? Of sticking our toes, gently at first, even gingerly, perhaps, into a world devoid of evil? Of exploring a reality so new, so rich, so high and deep, so utterly good, that it will keep us dancing in the joy of God forever? But no, we mutter the word “heaven” and let it go at that. Worse, we populate that heaven with people just like us and ignore St. Matthew’s invitation—he’ll pepper us with this in coming weeks—to fancy the prospect of chatting cheerfully with the likes of mad magi, blind beggars, and that Canaanite woman’s crazy daughter, all of them made new because somebody trusted Jesus to do that for them.

I wonder if this shriveling of Christian hope hasn’t fed the abandonment of hope by today’s smart set. I mean hope of the personal kind, the prospect of a new me and a new you having ourselves an everlasting blast in an eschatological beyond that presents itself as sheer, impossible gift, too good to be true and yet—God be praised—it is true. But this is precisely the hope that *Mr. Penumbra* dismisses; and the dismissal is even fiercer in Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* trilogy, the atheist’s defiant rejoinder to C. S. Lewis’s *Chronicles of Narnia*. I read this a few years ago. Pullman is a whale of a writer. He easily beats Lewis at the storytelling game, with a magnificent mind-stretching tale that grips from beginning to end, every word in perfect place. Along the way he hammers on the church, which he loathes with a frank and unmasked bitterness. It peddles lies, he says; it drapes the human spirit in

needless chains, it sucks the joy from being vividly alive, not least as sexual human beings. Anyone who knows the church, small "c," and its age-old penchant for reducing evangelical magnificence to rule-encrusted dreck is obliged to cede some points to Pullman—many points, even. And when Pullman charges that the church's promise of afterlife is far too mean and dreary to warrant the dreariness it imposes on people in the here and now, I, for one would heartily agree, on the grounds, again, that what the church keeps peddling as a matter of course is a wretchedly desiccated promise, dreary in the extreme.

Yet for all his determination to expose lies and shred false hope, it's Pullman who, in the end, delivers nonsense in the form of a hope so ludicrously thin that it's no hope at all. It's as if, like *Mr. Penumbra's* Robin Sloan, he can't quite bear to leave the reader staring at the prospect of utter extinction, with nothing whatsoever beyond death to look forward to. There has got to be, for me, something, if only the faintest smidgeon of a something: at least a remembering, as Sloan seems to tell it. In Pullman's story there's a wee bubble of happiness, a frisson of joy as the dead release their atoms to mingle with all the other atoms of the universe, and who knows, perhaps the atoms of dead heroes and lovers will bump into each other in the vastness to come, and when they do they'll vibrate with a hint of mutual recognition. Oh happy day!

Really, was Pullman able to keep a straight face as he committed this to paper? I can't help but wonder.

Of this I have no doubt, that the Church, large "C", has a huge gift to pass along in the hope it gets to tell, if only we'll learn from the apostolic likes of Paul to tell

it well, in deed as well as word, through the spending of the self for the sake of the other that Christians at their best, banking on their future, have cheerfully done throughout the centuries. The key to this, of course, lies in starting and ending the telling with the astonishment called Christ. Romans 8 is the inexorable outcome of Romans 3-5. It drives with equal resolution to the doxological outburst to the end of Romans 11, where Paul wraps up his ruminations on Israel's rejection of the Gospel by committing one and all to the inscrutable mystery of the God who has better things in mind for the likes of Pullman and Sloan than they have for themselves, to say nothing of the rest of us (see [11:32](#)). For whom else did Christ die, if not for people whose imaginations, vivid though they be, are unwilling to encompass the best story ever?

Comes a delicious irony, and with it a point of conversational contact: turns out that Robin Sloan is on to something as he wraps up *Mr. Penumbra*. The secret to eternal life really does lie in having the right friend.

2. On Burgeoning Ignorance Anyone who teaches in U.S. churches these days is aware of how poorly known the Biblical story has gotten to be in the wider culture. Moses? "Never heard of him." The Lord's Prayer? "What's that?" And there's worse on its way. Here's a note (in case you missed it) that appeared in *The Christian Century* a couple of months ago, picking up on a report in the April 18 edition of the British newspaper *The Independent*:

"A Good Friday passion play was called off after the Oxford (England) City Council said the sponsoring church failed to get the proper permit. The council acted on the presumption that the passion play was a live sex show. In a statement of apology, an official said, 'At the time of

processing the application, I did not appreciate that this was a religious event.'"

Two fast comments. a) No wonder hope has shriveled in the contemporary West. b) And you thought, perhaps, that we exaggerate in calling this a mission field? Jerome Burce
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