

Goes to
Cupid @ Shul
~~"Wis a Cupid in a Shul"~~

(with affectionate acknowledgement to our old friend, the ~~Novon~~ in the Sukkah)

A summary of a sermon preached at
the Wellesley College Chapel,
Wellesley, Massachusetts
February 14, 1971

It's

~~It's~~ Valentine's Day, friends, until recently Saint Valentine's Day, a Church holiday, but now once again becoming, as in former times, purely a fine folk festival: the traditional mating day of birds (and humans too) in the English folk calendar.

"---St. Valentine is past;
Begin these wood-birds but to couple now?"
---Midsummer Nights Dream

"Nature, the vicare of the Almightye Lord,
...
In easy voice began to speak and say,
Foules, take heed of my sentence ~~xx~~ I pray,
...
Ye know well, how on St. Valentine's Day,
By my statute and through my governaunce,
Ye doe chese your makes, and after flie away
With hem as I pricke you with pleasaunce."
---Chaucer

(1)

It is, then, appropriate, isn't it, that our text today be not Scriptural verse but symbolic vision: CUPID.

The Cupid I refer to is the familiar classical figure of erotic power. Often winged, sometimes a boy, in later times a baby, he was in earlier Greek ages rather phallic in representation, and was identified with Dionysus while frequently associating with Aphrodite. In short, a fine pagan symbol.

So what kind of "text" is a "pagan symbol" for a Judaeo-Christian service? Frankly, a more appropriate one than it would first seem. For Cupid is not exclusively a pagan symbol. He appears on Jewish sarcophagi in Rome, on paintings in Jewish catacombs in Rome, and most significantly, above the door

(1) cited in John Brand's Popular Antiquities of Great Britain

of the synagogue remains at Capernaum---and above the main door at that!

So if Palestinian Jews of the first century found it fitting to go to a shul where they were greeted each time by Cupid's form, the winged one is not to be entirely dismissed from Jewish-Christian religious consideration.

What, then, is the significance of this figure in Greco-Roman times? What might he be saying as he stands there in bas relief above the entrance way? The late Professor Erwin Goodenough's fine and suggestive treatment of this figure is most helpful to our hearing Cupid's message---and an interesting message it is. (2)

In what does it consist?

← A) Love intoxicates

Cupids often are represented holding cups, are often associated with Dionysus, and suggest at one level that love intoxicates. This is true, is it not? Giddiness, faintness, a sense of bedazzlement, a veritable drunkenness are widely attested in literature.

"I am faint with love...Turn your eyes away from me, for they ~~are~~ undo
Eat, friends, drink, and be drunk with love." me...
x You have ravished my heart... 4:9,
---Song of Songs 2:5, 5:8, 6:5, 15:1

Categories disappear, for "love's function is to fabricate unknownness."
And so, in fact, do we.

"if(touched by love's own secret)we, like homing
through welcoming sweet miracles of air
(and joyfully all truths of wing resuming)
selves, into infinite tomorrow steer"

---e.e.cummings

It is, friends, the trip of trips, not yet illegalized by contending tyrannies and perhaps even beyond their reach. Love is, indeed, an intoxicant.

But this may make it sound like a personal luxury, a frill, an indulgence rather than a personal necessity. And necessity it is, for it offers

B) Release from the hell of isolation

x "It is a good thing to be initiated into the Eleusinian mysteries; but although I am not at all credulous about the myths, nor am I a complete disbeliever, I perceive that those who are orgiasts and initiates of Eros have a better fate in Hades. For those myths express the truth, hit upon it by a certain divine chance, when they say that there is for lovers a way up out of Hades into the light. Where and how this is they do not know..."

---Plutarch, Amatorius, 17
(quoted in Goodenough, italics mine)

This notion is not only Greek. Long established in the Rabbinic tradition is the inappropriateness of isolation.

"It is not good for a man to be alone" (Genesis 2:18)

To live in isolation is to live "without joy, without blessing,
without happiness" (Yebamot 62b)

There is even a Rabbinic legend similar to the Greek reported in Plato:

Said Rabbi Jeremiah son of Eleazar: Primordial Person,
At the time when the Holy One, Blessed be He, created the ~~androgynous~~ ~~Person~~
that Person was created androgynous, as is written:

"Male and Female created He Them."

Said Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel:

At the time ~~when~~ the Holy One, Blessed be He, created the Primordial Person,
that Person was created with two faces (one male, one female).

That Person was then cut in two, and separated.

---Bereshit Rabbah, 8:1

Could it be better said than by Cummings?

one's not half two. It's two
are halves of one:
which halves reintegrating,
shall occur
no death and any quantity;...

And this re-uniting is not only right but wondrous:

what's wholly
marvellous my

Darling

is that you &
i are more than you

& i (be

ca
us

e It's we)

The poets celebrate, and rightly, the miracle and wonder of union, of re-uniting, but it is against a keen awareness of the darkness and the difficulty of it all.

It is when we try to grapple with another man's intimate need that we perceive how incomprehensible, wavering, and misty are the beings that share with us the sight of the stars and the warmth of the sun. It is as if loneliness were a hard and absolute condition of existence; the envelope of flesh and blood on which our eyes are fixed melts before the outstretched hand, and there remains only the capricious, unconsolable, and elusive spirit that ~~no~~ ^{no} eye can follow, no hand can grasp.

---Joseph Conrad, Lord Jim (end Ch. 16)

Conrad's sobering and poignant words are far from wrong. Small wonder, then, that poets and ancients ~~also~~ liked to be reminded by Cupid that somehow, by whatever miracle not fully understood, "there is ~~for~~ for lovers a way up out of Hades into the light."

C) Fills mean souls with grace

But the effects of love, thought the ancients, were not simply personal, they were social as well.

"The saving effect of love is not only that it makes men pleasant who were far from affable, but that it makes a "soul that is narrow, debased, and misbegotten to be suddenly filled with understanding, a sense of humor, grace, and liberality." When we recognize the change, which is like putting a light into a ~~x~~ house at night, we should exclaim with Telemachus, "Surely, some god is within."

---Goodenough

The persons who will save us, who will usher in the ~~new~~ new society, can hardly be the narrow, constricted, often hate-filled reverse copies of today's destroying spirits. Love may not be all we need, but neither is it entirely beside the point. And it may be no accident that a poet of love and celebration like Dan Berrigan, the loveliest leprechaun this side of anywhere, found it preferable to burn papers rather than persons.

It also seems appropriate, especially on Valentine's Day, to recall that the great lover of the Middle Ages, Peter Abelard,

"Was the only leader in the Middle Ages who ventured to

"attack, openly, the anti-Jewish tradition of Christendom. He attacked the tradition at its root. He said the Jewish people were not responsible for the death of Christ..."

And for this he was bitterly criticized by other churchmen, including the Benedictine author of a Literary History of France (1789), who opined: "Abelard was led astray by his tender heart and inquisitive mind..."

---Malcolm Hay: Europe and the Jews

It is nice to think that the love of Heloise and Abelard may have had some political as well as personal effects on our world, and that may well be so. Oh that more might be "led astray by tender hearts and inquisitive minds!"

D) Makes the world go 'round

One last element of Cupid's message should be mentioned.

"...it is love which makes the world go round. Love is the meaning of work and play alike, the source and center of its beauty. Love is capricious, often naughty and trouble-making, the pictures tell us, but still the one meaningful element in all activity.

---Goedenough

Love as a motive force was a common observation, and not necessarily caritas, agape, or anything so rarified. Eros was well thought of for a good long while.

Rabbi Nahman bar Shmuel bar Nahman reported Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahman to have said:

"Behold, it was good" refers to the "good impulse" (yetzer hatov)

"Behold, it was very good" refers to the "evil impulse" (yetzer hara).

But is the "evil impulse" indeed "very good?"

Yes. Were it not for the libido (yetzer hara) no one would build a house, wed, conceive and bear children, engage in trade, etc....

---Bereshit Rabbah 9:7

It is, I think, fair in the above to construe "yetzer hara" as referring to the erotic or libidinal. And this is supported by the Rabbinic legend that when Eros the Tempter stopped functioning, hens stopped laying, cocks ceased crowing, and the world nearly came to a halt.

Small wonder, then, that a force which intoxicated, which rescued from the hell of personal isolation, which filled mean souls with grace and so affected the social order, and which made the world go round, was seen as a fitting representation to place above the main entrance of the synagogue at Capernaum. For love was regarded as "the saving force...or what releases the saving force of God's nature." (Philo)

And considering the association of the Cupid figures with the themes of
immortality/through the sarcophagi, some Jews of that time might even have concurred with e.e.cummings' proclamation that

love is the every only god
who spoke this earth so glad and big
...
so truly perfectly the skies
by merciful love whispered were...

Perhaps those who canonized the Song of Songs and who placed Cupid at their portal to prayer, coming and going in sight of him, would even agree, on a day such as this

trust your heart
if the seas catch fire
(and live by love
though the stars walk backward)
-----e.e.cummings

* * * * *

The drawing of Cupid, from an early Jewish sarcophagus fragment found in the catacombs at Torlonia, was executed by Alison Orr.

