

A reading from “Gateway to Hope” by Maria Boulding.

Though God is an almighty lover, he can find himself shut out, and he longs to find an open door of vulnerability in us. It is extraordinarily hard for us to realize this, conditioned as we are by the secular ethic of success and a religious ideal of moral perfection which may owe little to the Gospel. God calls us, implants his life in the deepest centre of our being at baptism, and loves us into growth. He does not propose to us some lofty, rigid ideal to which we must attain by our own unaided resources. We are more sinful than we know, more deeply flawed than we can recognize by any human insight; but grace works in us in the deepest places of body and spirit. We must live from our weakness, from the barren places of our need, because there is the spring of grace and the source of our strength, as Paul discovered: “When I am weak, then I am strong.” When we can stand before God in the truth of our need, acknowledging our sinfulness and bankruptcy, then we can celebrate his mercy. Then we are living by grace, and we can allow full scope to his joy.

For many of us it is difficult to live honestly from this place of failure and weakness. Even if we know from our heads we should, we may still slip back into the old attitudes and behave as though God were expecting us to succeed and making his love conditional upon our achievements. If we have become hardened in such an attitude, it may take some deep experience of failure to disabuse us. When a crisis occurs, I may find in myself the sheer moral impossibility of obeying God. It is not simply a matter of emotional rebellion, or of knowing that “the flesh is willing, but the spirit is weak”; the will itself is unwilling. I am rebellious to the core and do not even want to want God’s will. Perhaps, I can push it one stage further from me, and say with a kind of tortured effort, “I want to want to want your will,” and then ask myself if there is even a grain of honesty or good will in that. I am helpless; and as the father of an epileptic boy cried to Jesus, “I do believe, help my unbelief,” so, I can only say to God, “I am rebellious down to my roots, help me.”

Here, as we teeter on the edge of despair, beset by every kind of temptation and feeling as though we had already fallen, the Spirit is released. This is his own place, the deepest place of our being where he is wedded to our spirit, where he can act and give life, where he can free us from all that hampers the true thrust of our will. God himself creates our freedom; he gives us freedom as his continuing gift of love, and alone he can influence it from within, in no way violating it or diminishing it. Entombed Lazarus is a sign not simply of a certain group of people who had obviously closed their hearts against Jesus, but of each one of us. In this hopeless situation, where you are nothing but stark failure, you know the miracle of grace. This tomb is the place of resurrection, and if you believe you will see the glory of God.