

SACRIFICE: WHAT'S WRONG WITH THIS PICTURE? PART ONE: DIAGNOSIS

I recently wrote about the perceived dichotomy (or split) between “Beauty” and “Truth,” and I made the observation that in many people’s minds today the former is meaningful while the latter is much less so.

I also suggested that along with “Truth” the notion involved in authentic Christianity that is least likely to see enthusiastic embrace is that of “Sacrifice.” Why is this, and is there anything that can make the act of self-giving (done by us, mind you, not for us) more attractive?

In the final scene in J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, Sam tearfully realizes that Frodo is going to leave Middle-Earth forever. Here is the dialogue:

“But,” said Sam, and tears started in his eyes, “I thought you were going to enjoy the Shire, too, for years and years, after all you have done.”

“So I thought too, once. But I have been too deeply hurt, Sam. I tried to save the Shire, and it has been saved, but not for me. It must often be so, Sam, when things are in danger: some one has to give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them.”

What, I ask, is wrong with this picture?

The trouble with this picture is that Tolkien was a member of the generation that preceded “The Greatest Generation”—he and C. S. Lewis and the rest of the *Inklings* were the products of World War I, and Tolkien’s son Christopher was in the RAF during World War II. This was a land that knew the devastation of the slaughter in the trenches in the “Great War”; it knew the Depression, and it knew the air raids of Hitler’s Luftwaffe during World War II. It knew rationing to the extent that chocolate was not commonly available in England even as late as the early 1950’s. It was a time and a world that knew suffering as a way of life, knew deprivation of material goods as standard operating procedure, and knew the mystical, metaphysical, notions like love and freedom, as the highest realities. And so of course this generation would have easily echoed Frodo’s words to Sam.

But we in the 21st century United States are different. Ours is a life of more abundance than has ever been known in the history of humanity. Ours is a life of ease, primarily because the “Greatest Generation” decided that their children and grandchildren would never have to know the hardships they had suffered. By and large, we haven’t. By and large, we may be the worse for it. Bob Dylan knew this: “When you got nothing, you got nothing to lose.” So sacrifice in that context makes more sense. But when you “got everything”? Or what you think is “everything”? (See Mk. 10:17ff.).

So much for diagnosis. Is there a treatment and prescription for us?