

Trinity College Cambridge
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**Some Modern Saints?
Simone Weil**

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In the reading from St Matthew [26: 31–46] to which we have listened, Peter vows eternal loyalty to Christ. Simone Weil makes this characteristically astringent comment:

To say to Christ: ‘I will never deny Thee’ was to deny him already, for it was supposing the source of faithfulness to be in himself and not in grace. Happily, as he was chosen, this denial was made manifest to all and to himself. How many others boast in the same way – and they never understand.

This is unnerving in several ways, but Simone Weil’s life and writings are nothing if not unnerving. In her reflection on what she calls Peter’s ‘boast’ she takes a very low view of the human capacity for faithfulness. Are all our vows, promises and declarations of allegiance equally vacuous? Think of all the oaths that have been sworn in this Chapel: not *all* of them kept, to be sure, but not all of them doomed, one must hope. And would it really be just to describe them all as ‘*boasts*’?

But then she goes on to make a distinction. Peter and the disciples were in an unprecedented position.

It was difficult to be faithful to Christ. A fidelity in the void was needed. It was much easier to be faithful to Napoleon, even if it involved death. It was easier for the martyrs to be faithful, later on, because the Church was already there, a force with temporal promises. We die for what is strong, not for what is weak ... The fact of dying for what is strong robs death of its bitterness – and at the same time of all its value.

Whatever our beliefs, we can appreciate the distinction she makes here between the temporal and the transcendent. But that last sentence, and its final clause in particular just take the breath away: ‘The fact of dying for what is strong robs death of its bitterness – and at the same time of all its value.’ Were the deaths of the martyrs invalidated by the establishment of the Church, with its corruptingly ‘temporal promises’? Is the *only* kind of death worth dying one for ‘weakness’? Is *all* value to be ascribed to ‘weakness’ and none whatsoever to ‘strength’? What *are* ‘strength’ and ‘weakness’?

The first time that Simone Weil is known to have been called a saint, she was eight years' old. Her brother André, who would go on to become an eminent mathematician, said that 'she trained herself quite consciously' to be a saint, but he also said that she 'did not spend her life analysing idolatry in order to end up becoming an idol'. She was deeply suspicious of power of all kinds, including celebrity. She scorned worldly ambitions. A brilliant graduate of the Ecole Normale Supérieure, she was always in trouble at the French Lycées she went on to teach at, with a lofty disregard for her pupils' need to pass mere temporal examinations. She said: 'I have always regarded dismissal as the normal culmination of my career.' She was responsive to beauty, natural and artistic, but she was worried by the appetites it aroused. She hazarded the view that 'vice, depravity and crime are nearly always attempts to eat beauty, to eat what we should only look at.' No wonder then that she was so drawn to the great poem by George Herbert that begins 'Love bade me welcome, yet my soul drew back', and ends in surrender: 'So I did sit and eat'. Man cannot live by bread alone, to be sure. But man cannot live by coffee and cigarettes alone, as she tried to. Though the causes of her early death at the age of 34 are disputed, the starvation diet she embraced for much of her life, especially its last part, certainly had much to do with it.

Her 'selflessness' was powered by an enormous will. The ascription or accusation of sainthood was assisted by her early death, and then promoted by the posthumous publication and translation of her writings, especially the volumes known in English as *Gravity and Grace*, *The Need for Roots*, and *Waiting on God*. T.S. Eliot, who helped to publish translations of her work after the war spoke of her as having 'a kind of genius akin to that of the saints.' But he also warned that her readers would find themselves confronted by 'a difficult, violent and complex personality'.

Simone Weil was obsessed with suffering. More exactly, she was obsessed with the suffering of other people; with the mystery of how their suffering affects us, of how we feel it, what we should do about it. Not just the sufferings of our nearest and dearest, or those closest to hand, but everyone, everywhere, throughout human history. Another Simone, Simone de Beauvoir, her scholarly rival, famously describes Weil's reaction to the news of famine in China: 'I envied her for having a heart that could beat right across the world.' I am reminded of a great sentence in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, that asks what would happen to us '[i]f we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life', and answers itself: 'it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence'. Simone Weil heard the roar, the cries and whispers of which it's composed. She lacked our normal layers of protection. 'Off, off, you lendings', cries King Lear as he strips himself naked on the heath. It was the one play of Shakespeare's with which Weil felt a particular affinity.

She hated worldly power and prestige, so it was not with Lear himself that she identified so much as his Fool. Not with Oedipus but with Antigone. Not with the triumphant Achilles but with his defeated antagonist Hector. If Christianity was the religion of slaves, as Nietzsche declared it, this was exactly what attracted her to it. She loathed Nietzsche. Her selflessness was not theoretical; her self-exposure was real, material, practical. In her own person she was a caricature of the brilliant but physically

inept intellectual. She joined a women's rugby team though she couldn't catch a ball; when she joined the socialist militia to fight Franco's forces in Spain her efforts to wield a rifle had her comrades running for cover; she got jobs in factories and in the fields that nearly killed her. She knew more about manual labour from first-hand experience than most intellectuals of any hue, including the Trotsky she invited to her parents' apartment in 1933, only to berate him for the blood on his hands: 'Why did you invite me?' Trotsky yelled at her. 'Do you belong to the Salvation Army?'

She didn't 'belong' to any army, or party, or nation, or church, for all her declaration of 'The Need for Roots', the sub-title of which is 'Prelude to a declaration of duties towards mankind'. Towards the end of her life she trembled on the threshold of the Catholic Church, but her place, she said, was always outside, with the excluded. Questions of loyalty and betrayal run deep in her life and thought, not least the impassioned rejection of her own Jewish and Judaic heritage. George Steiner and others have identified in her 'a classic Jewish self-loathing'. Rowan Williams expresses his dismay at 'her extraordinarily vitriolic and silly comments on Judaism – a real demonization of her own heritage'. These issues are too weighty and troubling to be dealt with in a short space. But it may be worth noting the price Weil paid for making so many absolute distinctions, some of which I have touched on this evening, between strength and weakness, between the temporal and the transcendental. There were further ruthlessly sharp distinctions crucial to her thought, between ancient Rome and Greece, between the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. It is always in the second of these pairs that she locates true absolute 'value', with peremptory certainty: weakness, transcendence, Greece, the New Testament.

Like the de Beauvoir who envied Simone Weil's heart – did she really, I wonder? – we might envy such certainty, especially when it is invoked in defence of justice, on behalf of the weak. As it is in the passage we've heard, where she thinks of the child as an emblem of vulnerability and expectancy, and related to this, the twin or sibling idea of the slave as a child beaten into submission. We carry this child within us, Weil insists, from cradle to grave, always susceptible to injury, never reconciled to injustice. In so far as we are not wholly victims but responsible adults, she says, we have a duty to listen to others, or even as we say 'listen *out*' for them, especially for the cry that lies on the other side of silence, apparently inaudible. We must cultivate a spirit of 'attentiveness', of expectancy, vigilance, as when Christ asks the disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane to 'watch'. And they are betrayed by the weakness of the flesh – the weakness Christ shares with them and us, the weakness that declares his humanity.

If Simone Weil tried to hear the unuttered cries of everyone's suffering, she also tried to stay permanently awake, knowing its impossibility. The body of work she has left us – both her life, her writings and the writings of others about her – this all provides cause for deep thought about sanctity, sainthood, saintliness, and the sacred, To borrow a fine phrase of George Steiner's, we may think of hers as 'A night-vision, as it were, of insomniac conscience'. And as T.S. Eliot rightly warned us: 'difficult, violent and complex'.