

Mercy's Looking Glass:
Ignatian Spirituality through the Lens of *Pilgrim's Progress*
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My recent study of *Pilgrim's Progress* has helped me develop a new way to introduce students to St. Ignatius's Spiritual Exercises. As readers probably know, Ignatius developed his "Exercises" (published in 1548) in Spain as a guidebook for helping others enter more fully into the life of Jesus; it is made up of a series of prompts that help the "retreatant" to imaginatively re-live various episodes in the gospels. The Exercises are organized into four "weeks" or stages: 1) the invitation to receive divine love; 2) the person and life of Jesus; 3) Jesus's suffering and death; 4) His resurrection and our participation in His ongoing life. Imagining the events of the gospels in this way has helped many people develop a greater appreciation for the Bible. They identify with Jesus and connect his life with their own daily lives, thus developing a more meaningful faith. Originally Ignatius developed these Spiritual Exercises for fellow Jesuits but over time they have been adapted for others. They continue to be popular nearly 500 years later.

In England, about a hundred years after Ignatius, John Bunyan developed another approach to Christian spirituality that also ended up having a huge and enduring influence on Christians around the world.¹ It was embraced by the Puritans and later carried around the world by Protestant missionaries. Published in the 1684, the two-part allegory is called *The Pilgrim's Progress from This World to That Which Is to Come*.

The Pilgrim's Progress is regarded as the most well-known religious allegory ever written as well as a great work of literature. Best known is Part 1, which tells of the journey of "Christian" from the "City of Destruction"—through swamps, steep hills, wicked cities, dungeons, and mountains—toward the "Celestial City" that awaits him after death.²

¹ Scholar Tim Noble has already pointed out similarities between the lives of Bunyan and Ignatius. Each was a former soldier who had a spiritual awakening in his late twenties and went on to write a guide to help others understand the Bible and deepen their faith. Both men helped others cultivate imagination to more deeply experience biblical events, and they also provided a language for talking about inward spiritual experiences. Ignatius and Bunyan were both persecuted by the state churches (the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England respectively) but later accepted. Members of the Society of Jesus carried the ideas of Ignatius around the world, and missionaries carried Bunyan's allegory to places as distant as Africa, Asia, and India. See Noble, "Pilgrims Progressing: Ignatius of Loyola and John Bunyan." *Baptistic Theologies*. 2011, Vol. 3, Issue 2, pp. 64-78.

² Many phrases from *Pilgrim's Progress* continue in use: Vanity Fair, House Beautiful, Slough of Despond, the "straight and narrow", and more. Bunyan's characters show up in other classic works by Charlotte Bronte, Louisa May Alcott, Hannah Hurnard (*Hinds' Feet in High Places*, another allegory), etc..

Part 2 tells of the same journey, except this time it is undertaken by Christiana, the wife of Christian. Earlier she refused to accompany her husband, but now she has received a personal invitation from “the King” of the Celestial City. She sets out with their young four sons and a companion, a neighbor named Mercy.

Parts 1 and 2 both recount the same route from the earthly City of Destruction to the heavenly Celestial City, with the same sequence of tests and obstacles along the way. The biggest difference is that Part 1 tells of a man traveling alone (sometimes with a single companion, first “Faithful” and later “Hopeful”) while, in contrast, Part 2 tells of a group traveling together. Initially it is a group of six—Mercy, Christiana, and her four boys—but in time the group grows to over twenty as others join them, including new spouses, the lame and infirm, prisoners, even new children.

Both journeys include an encounter with some shepherds who offer a special “glass” as an aid to the respective pilgrims. This encounter occurs about 2/3 of the way through their journey, shortly after the pilgrims have faced off with Giant Despair, and just before they enter the dangerous Enchanted Ground. “Despair” is a huge giant who traps the pilgrims and tries to persuade them to commit suicide. He plans to eat them, but they escape. Soon they meet some kindly shepherds.

In Part 1, the shepherds give Christian and Hopeful a “perspective glass” (a telescope) and take them to a hilltop so they can look for the Celestial City in the distance: “They could not look steadily through the Glass; yet they thought they saw something like the Gate, and also some of the Glory of the place” (p. 95). This glimpse of their glorious goal renews their courage and resolve.

In Part 2, the shepherds give Christiana and Mercy a different kind of optical instrument. Christiana notices that Mercy (who by now is married and pregnant) is pale and trembling, so she asks what troubles her. Mercy explains that she has seen a “looking glass” in the shepherds’ dining room that she cannot get out of her mind.³ She longs for it, and even fears that she will miscarry her baby if she does not get it. This behavior is extremely out of character for Mercy who is known for her “works of mercy”; she continually sews for the poor, and never seeks anything for herself. But she cannot stop wanting this looking glass. The narrator explains:

The looking glass was one of a thousand. It would present a man, one way, with his own Feature exactly, and turn it but an other way, and it would shew one the very Face and Similitude of the Prince of Pilgrims himself. Yea, I have talked with them that can tell, and they have said that they have seen the very Crown of Thorns upon his Head, by

looking in that Glass; they have also seen the Holes in his Hands, his Feet, and his Side. Yea, such an excellency is there in that Glass, that it will shew him to one where they have a mind to see him: whether living or dead, whether in Earth or Heaven, whether in a state of Humiliation, or in his Exaltation, whether coming to Suffer or coming to Reign pp. 225 (slightly paraphrased for clarity)

When Christiana mentions that Mercy has a request, the shepherds eagerly offer to *give* her the looking glass.

These two different optical instruments both encourage the embattled pilgrims by providing a fresh perspective. The telescope lets Christian see his goal of the Celestial City. This helps him keep resisting temptation and pressing onward. Christian demonstrates virtues that are part of the legacy of Bunyan and his fellow Puritans; he resists temporary gratifications in favor of the fulfillment that awaits him after death. Such delayed gratification fosters many virtues including thrift, courage, hard work, loyalty, and sobriety. Throughout Part 1, Christian remains defensive, fighting off temptations, but there is not much mention of joy or compassion, or even caring relationships with other people.

In contrast, the looking glass in Part 2 shows Mercy herself and also Jesus. Instead of an unsteady glimpse of their destination, it mirrors Mercy's present face, as well as the face of Jesus, who lived in the past but now transcends time. She can "see" his earthly life and also his mythic life; the glass reveals the Prince of Pilgrims "whether in Earth or Heaven, whether in a state of Humiliation, or in his Exaltation, whether coming to Suffer or coming to Reign" (225).

Most of us have had the experience of looking into a shop window on a bright day. We see our own reflection and whatever is behind us; if we look more closely, we can also see what is beyond the window. Perhaps the shepherds' looking glass was something like that. Mercy sees herself at first but she can look more closely and see Jesus beyond her own reflection. The looking glass introduces elements of introspection and imagination that are lacking in Part 1. Instead of looking off in the distance the way Christian does, Mercy looks more deeply at her own reflection. Jesus is not just in the far-off Celestial City, he is also with Mercy as she journeys. Mercy must look hard to see the face of Jesus, but he is there, in his suffering, and also in his triumph and power. It is even suggested that she can see him in the faces of others. The looking glass affirms Jesus's close companionship with Mercy.

This effort to look *beyond the surface* links Mercy's looking glass to the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises. The Exercises also help us to "see" events in the life of Jesus super-imposed on (or lying beyond) images from one's daily life.

³ In *Pilgrim's Progress*, the shepherds have a dining room, even a palace!

To introduce this approach to students, I would likely use a personal example of a recent experience. Last year a friend of mine, Pat, had a fall and a mild stroke that landed her in a nursing facility. Earlier, she had been experiencing some memory loss associated with her age of 86. Now it seemed likely that she would be staying in the facility for her remaining years, especially since she could no longer walk without a walker. As a nun, she had no children to help her and most of her peers were also elderly.

When I learned of Pat's fall, I felt a tug to visit her, but I resisted it. I didn't want to see her in a diminished state, and I knew from past experiences that a nursing facility can be a depressing place. I was too busy! Selfishly, I also didn't want to think about growing old myself and one day becoming frail. Besides, she wasn't an especially close friend. These were the thoughts that I wrestled with. And yet the tug continued.

During my daily prayer time, the image of Mercy's looking glass came to me. I pictured Pat with her walker, having lost her independence and some of her memory, now uprooted from her familiar home. Merging with this image was the tender face of Jesus suffering with her. And beyond those images was a glimpse of Jesus in glory, not at the end of time, but *now*. Imagining these layered "reflections" helped me to become less fearful of visiting Pat. She was suffering some losses now, it was true, but they wouldn't last forever. These losses were part of being human; they were part of her Pat's sharing in the suffering of Jesus. If I could hold to this view—the perspective of Mercy's looking glass—perhaps I could visit Pat without feeling so heavy hearted. I also recalled the words of Jesus: "Whatsoever you do to the least of these, you do to me."

These musings helped me decide to visit Pat, and soon to make an inner commitment visit regularly, at least every two weeks, to encourage her and help her in whatever ways I could. At first I felt awkward but soon I began to look forward to our visits. We found creative ways to enjoy our time together—like reading poetry aloud (which we both love), playing a computer memory game, looking at photos, or taking a short walk outdoors. I found myself collecting jokes, cartoons, or bits of news I could bring to Pat so I wouldn't end up complaining about traffic or the weather. She apologized when she couldn't remember certain words or events, but I reminded her that I love her for her own dear self. As I visited more, I could sense my love for Pat deepening, and the love seemed more important than anything else. She always told me how much she enjoyed my visits. She even once remarked, "God sent you to help me get through this rough time" and I agreed. The visits have become a natural habit.

To return to *Pilgrim's Progress*, Mercy's looking glass resonates with other biblical passages. "Now we see through a glass darkly, but then face to face" (I Cor. 13: 12), a favorite

verse, reminds me that what we see with our eyes is only part of reality. Similarly, in the gospel accounts of Jesus's appearance after death, there is an altered kind of seeing. He appears to various followers at the tomb, on the seashore, on the road to Emmaus, even in a locked room. In each case, his followers do not recognize him at first; as he speaks, he gradually comes into focus. They are amazed, and fear is replaced by love.

Part 1 of Pilgrim's Progress has been more widely read and received far more scholarly attention than Part 2, even though they are usually published together. Part 2 tells a more communal story than Part 1. It also seems to take longer as weddings, festive meals, births, and illnesses all occur along the way. Their relationships are more important. The pilgrims depend on one another as they travel together and they welcome others who want to join them. It is no surprise that love, joy, and kindness to one another are highlighted.

Like Bunyan's pilgrims, we all can benefit from periodically trying out different perspective as we continue on a spiritual path. We need to look at where we are headed in the distant future, but we also need to look at what is happening *now*. Like Mercy, we grow stronger (and more joyful) when we notice where Jesus is present in our lives today.