

Be Thou My Vision

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May my words be a lamp to our feet, and a light to our path.

Many years ago Henry, Charlie, and I visited the Fife Coast with friends, Chris and Pat, and their two children. Chris had grown up in what used to be called “the Kingdom of Fife”—just across the Firth of Forth from Edinburgh—and he was eager to show us the handful of charming fishing villages, prosperous until over-fishing off the east coast of Scotland ended the herring trade. Among those villages was Dunino, where Chris and Pat were married. While our children romped around the churchyard, Chris took us into the church, slid onto the organ bench, and played for us “Be Thou My Vision,” their wedding hymn. I have always loved that hymn, its tune written in Ireland around the year 700. When we sing it now I think of that sunny day in Dunino. And since Pat’s death a few years later, I cannot hear it without thinking of the terrible grief that felled Chris and his children.

Chris is a writer, and after struggling without a rudder the first year after Pat’s death, he did what writers do best: he began to write about the experience of her illness and death. But he also did something unexpected and amazing: he decided to follow in the footsteps of a fellow Scot, Robert Louis Stevenson—of *Kidnaped* and *Treasure Island*—who was in a dilemma: whether to marry Fanny Osbourne, the woman he loved. To come to terms with his uncertainty, Stevenson chose to travel by donkey through the Cévennes, a rugged mountain range in south-central France. The journey—difficult for a man as frail as Stevenson—led him to a joyful marriage to Fanny.

When Chris told us what he was going to do, we, of course, thought he was mad. I suppose in some ways he was: bereft of his wife; trying to

raise his sorrowful children and to keep a semblance of domestic order; unable to focus on his teaching of English. The journey through the mountains, with his hired donkey, Anatole, saved his sanity and returned him to the land of the living. Today he is married again, to Anna, a Russian woman. They have a daughter and a son who are close to their older brother and sister, who also live in Edinburgh. On our visit to Scotland in July we had lunch with Chris and Anna, and their younger son, Sam. I thought of Pat that day, but I also saw the joy in Chris's life.

Why do I tell you this story of Chris's journey? How did I get from an ancient Irish hymn to a friend's grief? And what does it all have to do with today's reading from the Gospel of John? As so often happens when I am writing, my mind leaps, forcing me to connect seemingly disparate ideas. Reading the lessons for today I remembered that the last Sunday of July we heard the account of the loaves and fishes: food for body, food for soul. Indeed, this month all of our Gospel readings are from John, and they all speak of Jesus as the bread of life.

As "Be Thou My Vision" wafted through my head, I began to think about *To Travel Hopefully*, Chris's account of his journey with Anatole, and so I opened the book, skimming for events that had moved me on my first reading of it when it came out in 2005. Chris's words led me into the strange world of Roman Catholic monastic life in the rugged Cévennes. Strange to me, but I would think even stranger to Chris, who was raised in the harsh theology of the Scottish Presbyterian Church. In the monasteries where he stayed he encountered strict adherence to the monastic hours, and especially to its emphasis on the bread and wine of communion as the basis of life in Christ.

Chris, wounded soul that he was, found sanity in the earthiness of the monastic world. At Our Lady of the Snows, the first monastery on his journey, Chris arrived cold and tired, and just in time for a shower before dinner. He reflected that the shower was "the principal thing. Every drop was holy water. *Ye must be born again of water.* . . and I

stepped out of the shower born again.” He remarks in that same chapter that this monastery was “Lady Rome at home: domesticated, countrified, innocent, appealing—and yet seductive.” Their hospitality drew him in, opening him to God’s presence in the earthiness of bread and wine. Indeed, Chris’s first act at the visitors’ shop was to buy the monastery’s home-made brown bread and fresh white rolls.

The friar who was the bread-maker, seeing Chris’s interest in the bread, took him into the kitchen where he labored daily. He said to Chris: “You have to stand in front of your oven just as if you were praying. That way you can save the world. And what comes out will be the bread of life.”

Chris gave himself over to the boundless hospitality of the monasteries along the way, and in so doing, he learned how to open himself to God’s presence. At the conclusion of his travels he says: “I arrived at Our Lady of the Snows sick in body and soul . . . and I left it feeling infinitely refreshed in both.” He was on his way to the healing that made it possible for him to love again, to begin another family who would meld with his children by Pat.

John writes in today’s Gospel: “Jesus said, ‘I am the bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh. . . . This is the bread which came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.’” These were words Chris undoubtedly knew from his childhood steeped in the faith. In his arduous journey he contemplated them, especially as he ate the bread from the monastic kitchens. And in the end he drew those words into himself. He opened himself to God’s presence in his life, and he began to heal.

