

## **CAN ONE BE A *STRANGER* UNTO GOD? CAMUS' ANSWER**

A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan

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The main character of Albert Camus' novel *The Stranger* faces beheading at the behest of state authorities, just as John the Baptist did in this morning's gospel lesson.<sup>i</sup> He feels, no doubt like John the Baptist, that his guillotine execution will be arbitrary and unjust. Looking for solace, he doesn't find it in God. Quite to the contrary, at the end he rejects any notion of God at all, and finds peace and happiness in what he calls the gentle indifference of the world. How different are the words from this morning's reading from the psalms:<sup>ii</sup> "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it."<sup>iii</sup> Camus' main character, Meursault, is alienated from almost everyone and everything around him. Hence the novel's title *The Stranger*. But can one ever truly be a stranger unto God?

The state authorities in the novel don't think so. Meursault has killed a man who knifed his friend, and he has a decent self-defense argument, since the knife was drawn again on him. But the examining magistrate focuses on the seemingly irrelevant fact that Meursault had shown insensitivity on the day of his mother's funeral several weeks before the killing. The magistrate confirms for himself that Meursault has a hardened criminal soul when he realizes that Meursault doesn't believe in God. In an environment where church-state separation does not seem to apply, the magistrate explains his own conviction that God will forgive the person who repents. Then he becomes very upset when he realizes that Meursault will not repent and ask for God's forgiveness, because

Meursault rejects the very notion that there is a God in the first place.<sup>iv</sup> The magistrate makes clear that his belief in God lies at the center of his understanding of the meaning of life itself. “Do you want my life to become meaningless?” he shouts at Meursault. In response, Meursault tells him that as far as he could see, it doesn’t have anything to do with him.<sup>v</sup>

Meursault’s great strength, as I see it, is his consistent, unrelenting honesty, even unto death. He says that on the day of his mother’s funeral he was so tired and sleepy that he wasn’t really aware of what was going on.<sup>vi</sup> He tells his girlfriend that although he enjoys being with her, he probably doesn’t love her.<sup>vii</sup> He explains to his boss, when given the opportunity to move to Paris and run a new office for the company, that one life is as good as another, and that actually he isn’t dissatisfied with his current life.<sup>viii</sup> He doesn’t feel much remorse for having killed another human being, and he tells the magistrate that in truth he feels more annoyed than sorry.<sup>ix</sup>

It’s the willingness to speak the unadulterated truth that also gets John the Baptist in trouble with the governmental authority of his day, King Herod. As today’s gospel reading explains, John was imprisoned for telling King Herod that his marriage to his brother’s wife was illegal while his brother was still alive.<sup>x</sup> Herod respected John, knowing that he was a righteous man, but his wife is ultimately able to convince him to have John beheaded. This week’s commentary in the journal *Christian Century* depicts John this way: “Seekers from all over the ‘Judean countryside...’ went out to meet him in the desert not because of his great theological acumen and insight, but because of his uncompromising veracity...John had the rare ability and willingness to ‘cut to the chase’ and give people the ‘straight dope’”...But...a conversation over coffee with the Baptizer

might reveal a disturbing reality: truth-telling often leads to suffering and sometimes to death.” The lesson of this morning’s gospel reading, according to this commentary in *The Christian Century* is that “In this season after Pentecost, as the church continues to reflect on the gift of the Spirit and the challenge of our Easter calling, it is time once again to take up the mantle of speaking truth in love and exposing the big and small lies that entangle us and threaten our undoing.”<sup>xi</sup>

We could, of course, say that when Meursault spoke the truth, it was not in an exalted prophetic posture of challenging the king. Yet, he did mount his own small challenge to the magistrate representing the state, who seemed to have unjustly framed his claim of self-defense in terms of his having different human emotions than was conventionally expected. Being different, and being honest in cases where others would employ tact and social grace, makes him an outsider or a stranger to the civilized world. This is enough to lead to his conviction and execution.

Camus is a twentieth century existentialist, in the philosophical tradition of Sartre, de Beauvoir, Heidegger and Jaspers. He insists that human beings are free, with a future determined not by fate, or by some plan of God, but instead by their own choices and actions. It is particularly important to be personally authentic and act with good faith and sincerity.<sup>xii</sup> Meursault is admirably authentic and sincere.

One of the most powerful exchanges in the novel comes near the end after Meursault’s been convicted of murder and has been sentenced by the presiding judge to have his “head cut off in a public square in the name of the French people.”<sup>xiii</sup> After refusing to see the prison chaplain four times, the priest comes into his cell uninvited and sits down on Meursault’s bunk. “God can help you,” he exclaims. “Every man I have

known in your position has turned to Him.” Meursault responds that that’s their right, but he doesn’t want anybody’s help, and he doesn’t have the time to pursue what doesn’t interest him. The chaplain then asks how he will face the terrifying ordeal of the guillotine. Meursault responds that he’ll face it exactly as he’s facing it now. The chaplain stands up, looks him straight in the eye, and says “Have you no hope at all? And do you really live with the thought that when you die, you die, and nothing remains?” “Yes,” Meursault replies simply.

So the priest sits back down, tells Meursault that he pities him, asks more questions, and claims that Meursault’s carrying a burden of sin from which he must free himself. Then the chaplain asks him to see. “See what?” The chaplain explains: “Every stone here sweats with suffering, I know that. I have never looked at them without a feeling of anguish. But deep in my heart I know that the most wretched among you have seen a divine face emerge from their darkness. That is the face you are asked to see.” But Meursault honestly has never seen anything emerge from any sweating stones. Eventually, after the priest makes more attempts to talk to him about God, Meursault starts to get mad and states that he’s had enough. He only has a little time left, and he doesn’t want to spend it on God. The priest puts his hand on his shoulder and says, “I am on your side. But you have no way of knowing it, because your heart is blind. I shall pray for you.”

As Meursault describes it: “Then, I don’t know why, but something inside me snapped. I started yelling at the top of my lungs, and I insulted him and told him not to waste his prayers on me. I grabbed him by the collar of his cassock. I was pouring out on him everything that was in my heart, cries of anger and cries of joy. He seemed so

certain about everything, didn't he. And yet none of his certainties was worth one hair of a woman's head...But I was sure about me, about everything, surer than he could ever be, sure of my life and sure of the death I had waiting for me... Nothing, nothing mattered,.. What did other people's death or a mother's love matter to me; what did his God or the lives people choose or the fate they think they elect matter to me?... The others would all be condemned one day. And he would be condemned too..." As Meursault continues shouting at the chaplain, the prison guards appear and tear the chaplain from his grip.<sup>xiv</sup>

Meursault is exhausted and falls asleep on his bunk. When he wakes up this is what he describes: "Sounds of the countryside were drifting in. Smells of night, earth, and salt air were cooling my temples. The wondrous peace of that sleeping summer flowed through me like a tide...For the first time in a long time I thought about Maman. I felt as if I understood why at the end of her life she had taken a 'fiance,' why she had played at beginning again. Even there, in that [rest] home where lives were fading out, evening was a kind of wistful respite. So close to death, Maman must have felt free then and ready to live it all again. Nobody, nobody had the right to cry over her. And I felt ready to live it all again too. As if that blind rage had washed me clean, rid me of hope; for the first time, in that night alive with signs and stars, I opened myself to the gentle indifference of the world."<sup>xv</sup>

So there's Camus' answer to the question of whether one can be a stranger unto God. Yes. For sure. With a lot of feeling. But you won't be surprised to hear that I feel differently as a minister of the gospel. Because, first of all, it's the biblical claim that God won't give up on anyone, ever. "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it."<sup>xvi</sup> One of the greatest images of Jesus is as shepherd: "I

am the good shepherd, the good shepherd gives His life for the sheep.”<sup>xvii</sup> The Psalms have laid the groundwork for this image of God: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want...I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”<sup>xviii</sup> Shepherds do not give up on their sheep, even when they go astray. God’s love is unconditional and eternal, whether you are Meursault or the magistrate or the chaplain – all imperfect beings like all the rest of us.

But what about respecting Meursault’s own autonomy as one who’s made his own existential choice to be a stranger unto God? The biblical God I know would respect that autonomy, that exercise of free will, just as God did with Job cursing the day of his birth and losing his faith in God.<sup>xix</sup> Or, just as God did with Peter denying Jesus three times when it really mattered.<sup>xx</sup> And then let’s look more closely at Meursault’s estrangement from God. No matter what he shouts at the chaplain, he’s still moved by nature -- by “the wondrous peace of that sleeping summer [which] flowed through me like a tide.”<sup>xxi</sup> That’s certainly part of my understanding of God, as life force. Meursault also bows to the new love his mother experienced near the end of her life – “I felt as if I understood why...”<sup>xxii</sup> And at least the indifference he experiences in the “night alive with signs and stars” is “gentle.”<sup>xxiii</sup>

So, with all due respect to Camus’ apparent answer that one can indeed be a stranger unto God, it doesn’t compute for me, either Biblically or even within the text of the novel *The Stranger* itself. But then, I’m just another magistrate whose life would become meaningless without God. I’m just another chaplain who counsels hope, who knows how often a divine face emerges from the darkness, who’s convinced that one’s physical death is not the end of the story. Finally, in the words of my college chaplain,

faith to me means to be grasped by the power of love. “Faith is recognizing that what makes God is infinite mercy, not infinite control; not power, but love unending.”<sup>xxiv</sup>

AMEN.

## NOTES

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- <sup>i</sup> Mark 6: 14-29.
- <sup>ii</sup> Psalm 24.
- <sup>iii</sup> Psalm 24: 1.
- <sup>iv</sup> Camus, *Stranger*, pp. 68-69.
- <sup>v</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.
- <sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.
- <sup>vii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.
- <sup>viii</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>ix</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 70, 100.
- <sup>x</sup> Mark 6: 17-18.
- <sup>xi</sup> Kevin Baker, "Living by the Word: Capital T," *The Christian Century* (July 11, 2006), p. 20.
- <sup>xii</sup> "Existentialism," *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Micropaedia, 1978, Vol. 4), pp. 631-632.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Camus, *Stranger*, p. 107.
- <sup>xiv</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 115-122.
- <sup>xv</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Psalm 24: 1
- <sup>xvii</sup> John 10:11
- <sup>xviii</sup> Psalm 23: 1, 6.
- <sup>xix</sup> Job 3:1-4; 5:14; 42:7.
- <sup>xx</sup> Matthew 26: 69-75; Mark 14: 66-72; Luke 22: 54-61.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Camus, *Stranger*, p. 122.
- <sup>xxii</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>xxiii</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>xxiv</sup> William Sloane Coffin, *Credo* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p. 7.