

Mere Straw



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Mere Straw

Good morning. I am happy and honored that each one of you is here. I am also happy and honored to be here among you.

At the same time, I must confess that, no matter how much I enjoy your company, I would rather not be here standing before you. When I was given the choice, whether to prepare the entire service for this morning, or just bring the meditation, I chose the latter.

This, for two reasons. The first should be obvious to those of you who know me best: Given the chance, no matter what the task, I would much rather have someone else do the work! So, I asked Fernando and his team to take responsibility for the rest of this devotional period.

But the second reason is much more important: It is the awkwardness of the situation. If I were in charge of preparing the entire service, I would feel the need to include a prayer of confession. And in that prayer, I would have to ask forgiveness for the ease with which I am carried into inordinate pride by events such as this and by friends such as you. And I would also have to call you to repent for your very nice exaggerations—nice and loving exaggerations, but exaggerations, nonetheless.

So, I would like to take these few minutes, first, to make one notation, and then to call you to the gospel by which we all live.

The notation I wish to make is that nothing of all that we are dealing with these days would have been possible without Catherine. At least half of all I have written was originally her ideas, and the rest she has helped me put in proper words. But even more importantly, most of what I have refrained from writing was not written because of her wisdom!

Catherine keeps me thinking. Catherine keeps me working. But even more, Catherine keeps me humble! And she does not keep me humble by putting me down—although occasionally, very deservedly, she does that too! She keeps me humble by constantly setting before me the high standard of what a human being and a Christian is to be. Thank you, Catherine! I love you!

One of Catherine's favorite quips when I need putting down is that I have never had an unpublished thought. That may well be almost true. But even more so, is the counterpart of that statement, which she has never told me, but I know it to be true: Not only have I seldom had an unpublished thought, but also quite often I have had a published unthought!

As I now look back at over fifty years of writing and publishing, I find this to be an awesome responsibility. Writing comes to me easily. In fact, another of Catherine's favorite comments is that instead of blood I have printer's ink! (I suppose it would be more up to date to say that I have printer's toner.) But precisely because it comes easily, I have often wished I had not written something that I can no longer call back—a matter on which an auto maker has the advantage over me.

I experienced this wish to recall what I have written with my very first little book. A few months after I wrote it, I received a letter from a missionary whom I had known in Cuba. His letter had been posted from Viet Nam, where war was raging at the time. He commented about the wounded he was trying to comfort and about a fellow missionary who had been killed the night before. And then he said that what had prompted him to volunteer for service in a hospital in Viet Nam was something he had read in my little book!

For several months I did not publish another word. It was only after I knew that he was safe and sound back in North Carolina that I again felt comfortable putting my ideas into writing. But even so, I have often wondered: What may have been the consequences of my many published unthoughts?

But then, as I reflect on the matter, I come to the conclusion that, when it comes to theology, all our thoughts, published and unpublished, are unthoughts. The prophet Isaiah expresses this quite well when he speaks in the name of Yahweh: "My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts higher than your thoughts" (Is 55.8- 9).

We may be very proud of our thoughts about God, of our great systems of theology, of our learned disquisitions, of our exegesis and our hermeneutics. But when all is said and done, all our words, all our thoughts, barely glimpse at the mystery whom we seek to serve—a mystery so profound, a mystery so mysterious, that it has been hidden from the wise and the learned and has been revealed to babes. For the thoughts of God are as high above our thoughts as the heavens are high above the earth.

No wonder then, that towards the end of his short but very productive life, after having a vision of God, St. Thomas declared that all he had written—his two incomparable *Summas*, his commentary on the Sentences, his commentaries on Scripture, his commentaries on Aristotle, every last word of it—all was as straw.

In a similar vein, although much more humorous, Karl Barth, after having completed 13 volumes of his *Church Dogmatics*, commented that "The angels laugh at old Karl. They laugh at his trying to capture the truth of God in a book on dogmatics. They laugh because volume follows volume, each thicker than the last, and as they laugh, they say to each other: 'Look! There he goes with his wheelbarrow full of volumes on dogmatics!'"

Even without a vision as glorious as St. Thomas's or without a wit as sharp as Barth's, it should be clear to all of us that all we may do, all we may think, all we may write, all we may teach, is nothing but straw. There may be wheelbarrows and even wagon loads full of it, but it is still straw. Our words, straws carried away by the wind. Our thoughts, feeble straws at which we grasp in search of meaning. Houses of straw our theological systems.

This is not to say that our words, our thoughts, and our systems are not important. They are important, because they are all we have, all we can accomplish. They are important because we have been called to be stewards of all we have, and this is what we have.

Once we realize that all our knowledge and all our wisdom are as straw, then—and only then—shall we be able to hear the gospel, the good news for us, in the words of Jesus, that these things that have been hidden from the wise and the learned, have been revealed to babes.

Straw. All straw. Yet, as I reflect on it, I am led to recall the words of Spanish poet Luis de Góngora y Argote:

*Caído se le ha un clavel
a la aurora de su seno.
¡Qué glorioso que está el heno,
porque ha caído sobre él!*

Or, in a somewhat loose translation:

Angels sing in awe:
the Word most divine
has chosen to shine
down here in our straw.

Yes, our words, our thoughts, our theology, are nothing but straw. But we can always rejoice and hope that, as in that manger long ago, it may be lowly straw in which the Lord of All has chosen to shine!

Come, Lord Jesus! Amen