

Lost in the Stars

Rarely does ~~amark~~ a novelist or a playwright capture the essence of the Christian faith while at the same time creating a work of art. But nearly thirty years ago, Alan Paton of South Africa, wrote a novel, Cry, the Beloved Country, that not only won critical acclaim from literary experts but painted <sup>such</sup> a living, believable word picture of Christ's redeeming love that Christian people were deeply moved by it. Later on Maxwell Anderson, one of American's leading playwrights, and Kurt Weill, one of our most brilliant ~~musical~~ composers, turned this novel into a superb musical drama which they called Lost in the Stars. Never in the intervening twenty-five years have I been as deeply moved as when I first saw this drama on Broadway.

To me the story of Cry, the Beloved Country and Lost in the Stars, has evoked the image and the presence of Christ. The setting is the tragic yet beautiful country of South Africa. This is ~~in~~ a country where the vast majority of the people are native blacks. Yet the land is ruled by a small but powerful white minority, primarily Dutch and English descendants who are fervently committed to their understanding of the Christian faith. The story opens in St. Mark's Church near Ndotsheini, Natal, South Africa. A chorus and a leader are singing of what has happened to this land where the black natives struggle to eke out a living:

There is a lovely road  
that runs from Ixopo into the hills.  
These hills  
are grass covered and rolling, and they are lovely  
beyond any singing of it.  
About you  
there is grass and bracken, and you may hear  
the forlorn crying of the ~~the~~ titihoya bird.  
The grass of the veld is rich and matted.  
You cannot see the soil.  
The grass holds the rain and mist,  
and they seep into the ground, feeding  
streams ~~in~~ in every clove.

The clove is cool and green and lovely beyond any singing of it.  
Then someone answers: But sing now of the lower hills.  
Where you stand the grass is rich and matted -  
but the rich green hills break down.  
They fall to the valley below -  
and, falling, change.



For they grow red and bare;  
 they cannot hold the rain and mist;  
 the streams run dry in the clove.  
 Too many cattle feed on the grass;  
 it is not kept or guarded or cared for,  
 It no longer keeps men, guards men, cares for men.  
 The titihoya cries here no more.

Answerer: Yes, wherever the hills have broken down and the red clay shows through, there poor people live and dig ever more desperately into the failing earth.

Leader: (sings)  
 The great red hills stand desolate,  
 and the earth has torn away like flesh.  
 These are the valleys  
 of old men and old women,  
 of mothers and children.  
 The men are away.  
 The young men and the girls are away.  
 The soil cannot keep them any more.

In this setting we are introduced to the Rev. Stephen Kumalo, the pastor of <sup>black</sup> St. Mark's ~~black~~ Church. Their son, Absalom, left over a year ago to go to the great city of Johannesburg, many hundreds of miles away. They are concerned because they have not heard from him. They know that young ~~black~~ boys <sup>Can</sup> get in serious trouble in the great city. They decide to take their meager life savings so that Stephen may take the long train ride to Johannesburg to see if he can find his son. At the station they confront James Jarvis, a rich white landowner who proudly rejects any gesture of friendship with the blacks. He, too, is going to Johannesburg to visit his son, Arthur. In Johannesburg, ~~Stephen~~ Stephen learns that his son is in serious trouble. He has been associating with persons <sup>who</sup> bode ill for his future. While he is searching, the son Absalom in the company of two other boys breaks into the home of Arthur Jarvis in Parkwold and in a moment of panic a gun is fired and Arthur Jarvis falls mortally wounded. It just happens that this son of the rich white landowner is a young man of the highest ideals who has given his life to seeking justice and equality for the native blacks. He has become an accomplished and articulate spokesman against racial apartheid. Now the two men, the poor Stephen Kumalo, and the rich white landowner, Jarvis, find themselves strangely sharing <sup>the</sup> ~~same~~ <sup>same tragedy</sup> ~~similar fate~~. The son of one lies dead ~~and~~ the other will soon die on the gallows for the crime. After visiting his son in the jail, Stephen returns to Ndotsheni <sup>with</sup> his heart broken. There he waits for the day when at 4 o'clock



in the morning his son will be executed for murder.

In this drama several themes are poignantly portrayed. Each of them explores the nature of the Christian gospel. I would like to share these three with you this morning.

-I-

ONE IS FOUND IN THE TITLE "LOST IN THE STARS." SHATTERED BY THE TRAGEDY STEPHEN RETURNS TO ~~THE~~ ~~NDOTSHENI~~ TO RESIGN FROM HIS PASTORATE ~~BECAUSE~~ TO SAY ~~HE~~ "NOW I BECOME A HINDRANCE TO YOU, AND NOT A HELP. I MUST GO."

Another reason he gives is this: "When I began to serve my God and my church I had a sure faith that the God of our faith ordered things well for men. I had a sure faith that though there was good and evil I knew which was good, and God knew it - and that men were better in their hearts for choosing good and not evil. Something has shaken this in me. I am not sure of my faith. I am lost. I am not sure now. I am not sure that we are not all lost. And a leader should not be lost. He should know the way, and so I resign my place." (Act II, Scene 5) Are there not times in the lives of us all when we feel utterly forsaken, when our faith is so badly shaken that we are no longer certain of what we had formerly believed? This is the deepest moment, perhaps, in our spiritual lives. Many of us have felt as Stephen did when he sang:

Before ~~the~~ Lord God made the sea and the land,  
He held all the stars in the palm of his hand.  
And they ran through his fingers like grains of sand,  
And one little star fell alone.

Then the Lord God hunted through the wide night air  
For the little dark star on the wind down there -  
And he stated and promised he take special care  
So it wouldn't get lost again.

Now a man don't mind if the stars grow dim  
And the clouds blow over and darken him,  
So long as the Lord God's watching over them,  
Keeping track how it all goes on.

But I've been walking through the night and the day  
Till my eyes get weary and my head turns grey,  
And sometimes it seems maybe God's gone away,  
Forgetting the promise that we heard him say -  
And we're lost out here in the stars -  
Little stars, big stars,  
Blowing through the night,  
And we're lost out here in the stars.  
(Act I, Scene 12)

Have you not known times like that? When you have experienced a serious illness, or suffered the loss of a loved one, or~~re~~ seen your business or job go bad, or lose a friend? Are you not inclined to think that you reside on a tiny ball of life, a star, blowing through the endless and pitiless emptiness of the universe? Yes, even a person like Stephen Kumalo who has spent his life in faithful ministry can, on occasion, be so devastated that he may, for the moment, wonder~~ed~~ if he has been abandoned.

-II-

ANOTHER THEME MOST POIGNANTLY SOUNDED IN THIS DRAMA IS PERVASIVE JUST BECAUSE WE MUST REALIZE, ULTIMATELY, THAT WE ARE FRAIL, MORTAL HUMAN BEINGS. BROUGHT FACE TO FACE WITH DEATH THERE IS NOT A ONE OF US WHO DOES NOT AT TIMES WONDER ABOUT THE BREVITY AND THE MYSTERY OF HIS LIFE.

This note is sounded in one of the great psalms, almost always read at the burial of our dead:

Thou carriest them away as with a flood; they are as a sleep;  
in the morning they are like grass which groweth up.

In the morning it flourisheth, and groweth up; in the evening  
it is cut down, and withereth

In "Lost in the Stars" these moving lines of poetry are sung by the chorus and they frame a feeling universal ~~among~~ among men:

A bird of passage out of night  
Flies in at a lighted door,  
Flies through and on in its darkened flight  
And then is seen no more.  
This is the life of men on earth:  
Out of darkness we come at birth  
Into a lamplit room, and then -  
Go forward into dark again,  
(Act III, Scene 5)

~~Man~~ Humans have always felt their kinship with the dust. They have always wondered what lies through that open door that leads from the lamplit room. And yet by faith they have believe that they do go forward, even if into what seems to them to be dark again.

The Christian has always believed that it is Christ who stands at that door lighting the way to Eternity.



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BUT NEITHER THE DRAMA "LOST IN THE STARS" NOR THE NEW TESTAMENT LEAVES US ALONE AS LOST SOULS. THROUGH EVEN THE GRIMMEST TRAGEDY THERE COME THE LIGHT AND HOPE OF CALVARY.

Christians have always seen this hope in the crucifixion. They have believed that out of this bottomless despair and defeat there have come redemption and resurrection.

"Lost in the Stars" states this beautifully. Near the end as Stephen Kumalo is telling his congregation that he can no longer be their pastor, James Jarvis, a white man who has suffered also the loss of his son through the same encompassing tragedy, overhears what he is saying. Then Jarvis, to Stephen's great surprise, approaches him with an offer of friendship. Jarvis says:

Stephen Kumalo, my wife is dead. My son is dead. I live in a house with a child who knows me only as an old man. I have thought many times I would be better dead. I thought myself alone in this desolation that used to be my home. But when I heard you yesterday I knew that your grief and mine were the same. I know now that of all the men who live near this great valley you are the one I would want for a friend. And - I have been walking about - and came and knocked here now - because I wanted to sit with you in this hour -

Stephen can hardly believe this is true. But ~~when~~ Jarvis begs him to stay in Ndotsheni, ~~Stephen says~~

. . . Out of the horror of this crime some things have come that are gain and not loss. My son's words to me and my understanding of my son. And your words in the chapel, and my understanding of those words - and your son's face in the courtroom when he said he would not lie any more or do any evil. I shall never forget that.

Stephen asks:

And he is forgiven, and I am forgiven?

Jarvis replies:

Let us forgive each other.

. . .

Let us be neighbors. Let us be friends

Stephen says:

Ummumzana - before the clock strikes - I shall stay in Ndotsheni. You are welcome in this house. I have a friend.

Jarvis:

I have a friend.

Then the clock strikes four, signifying that at that moment

Absalom is dying on the gallows in faraway Johannesburg. And the chorus sings:

Each lives alone in a world of dark,  
Crossing the skies in a lonely arc,  
Save when love leaps out like a leaping spark  
Over thousands, thousands of miles!  
(Act III, Scene 6)

Certainly this is what the First Letter of John in the New Testament means when we read: "Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God; for God is love." This is the love that leaps out like a leaping spark, over thousands, thousands of miles.