

BEAUTY AND TRUTH

The great English poet John Keats ended his most famous poem with the following words” Beauty is truth, truth beauty: that is all you know on earth and all you need to know.”

These words may be fine poetry but unfortunately they are simply not true.

Beauty may indeed be truth, but not all truth is beautiful.

Some truths, in fact, are quite ugly.

I was led to think about this relationship between beauty and truth a during a recent trip my wife and I took to Europe.

We spent the first part of our trip in Hungary and Austria but the majority of our time in Germany.

I had never been to Germany and what I saw and learned there was eye-opening.

Germany has always been a unique country in Europe.

Some of the best things in European history have come out of Germany but some of the very worst have also had their origin there.

First—the best things.

Some of the best music that has ever been created has come from German composers.

Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, Haydn, Handel, Schubert, Schumann, Wagner, Mendelsohn, Richard Strauss—all of them musical giants.

In the field of science, the Germans have also been leaders.

Classical science may have originated in the Golden Age of Greece in the work of scientists like Aristotle, Archimedes and Euclid, but much of modern science came out of Germany.

Along with other scientists they produced Heisenberg, Planck, Kepler and Werner von Braun and, of course, the patriarch of modern science—Albert Einstein—who revolutionized physics and astronomy with his Theory of Relativity.

As far as physical beauty is concerned, I would have to say that Germany is the most beautiful place I have ever been.

From the Disney-like castles of King Ludwig to the manicured fields of German farmers, from the lush vineyards at Wurzburg to the Black Forest—traveling through is like being in a gigantic park.

Then there is the magnificent architecture one encounters in virtually every city.

Up to 95% of cities like Nurenborg, Passau and Cologne and Dresden were reduced to rubble by Allied bombing during the Second World war.

But instead of weeping over the ruins, the Germans got busy and rebuilt these cities—in most cases using stones

from the original buildings and now they are the same buildings as they were before the war.

Thousand-year-old Gothic Cathedrals continue to dominate the skyline—their spires rising up to 500 feet—almost as high as the Washington Monument.

Inside and out their walls are decorated with beautiful paintings and sculptures from the Renaissance and Baroque periods of art.

Finally, Germany has to be the most skillfully engineered country in the world.

Their famous road system—the Autobahn—is a network of superhighways that cover the entire country.

There is no speed limit, no potholes and very low accident rate.

In all these respects, Germany comes as close to an earthly paradise as I have ever seen.

So much for the best; now for the worst.

Germany has a shameful history of antisemitism.

Sadly, the Christian Church has been complicit in promoting some of it.

In the magnificent Cathedral of St. Peter in Cologne which was raised up over a thousand years ago, there is a stone sculpture just to the right of the entrance depicting a pig wearing a Jewish yamaka.

In the 16th Century, when the Bubonic plague was ravaging Europe, Jews were accused of spreading the disease by poisoning wells—in spite of the fact that Jews were dying from the plague along with everybody else;

In the city of Wertheim in Bavaria their synagogue was burned to the ground and a Christian church raised up where the synagogue had stood.

Those who escaped being murdered fled the city and few have ever returned.

Even the father of the Reformation, our own Martin Luther whom we revere, spoke harsh words against the Jews in his later years.

But all of these atrocities pale in comparison to the Shoah, the Holocaust, where over six million Jews died in death camps built and operated by the National Socialists.

So there is great beauty in Germany but there is also evil.

Of course beauty and evil exist in other countries as well—like Germany's neighbor, Russia.

Russia gave us the music of Tchaikovsky, Borodin, Moussorgsky and Sravinsky and the literature of Tolstoy, Doystoevsky, Petrov, Pushkin and Chekov.

In St. Petersburg there are perfect examples of classical architecture and in Moscow there is St. Basil's Cathedral—one of the most beautiful churches ever built.

But just as there has been beauty in Russia there has been evil as well.

In the 16th Century, Cossacks in Russia roamed the country destroying Jewish villages and murdering an estimated 500,000 Jews.

Four centuries later, when the Russians liberated the countries of eastern Europe from German control, the Jews experienced the same kind of abuse from them as they had received from the Germans.

In the four years that followed the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia—1917-1921—the communist government set about systematically eradicating Jewish communities in what were called *pogroms*.

As many as 500 Jewish communities in the Ukraine were wiped out and 60,000 Jews murdered.

The evil of antisemitism is a global phenomenon which has sporadically erupted—and continues to erupt—all over the world.

Including, nowadays, our own country.

Germany and Russia are only two examples.

In any event as I saw—and learned—these things in Germany the question that kept coming up in my mind was: “How can such beauty and such evil exist in the same country?”

How can they coexist in the same human heart?

And the answer, of course, is that that is the spiritual nature of mankind.

The Bible tells us that human beings are the pinnacle of God's creative work.

Shakespeare described mankind this way: *“What a piece of work is man? How infinite in faculty! How noble in reason! In form and movement how express and admirable! In action how like an angel; in apprehension how like a god! The beauty of the world! The paragon of animals!”*

The same Bible, however, tells us that mankind can become utterly and completely evil.

“The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. And the Lord was grieved that he had made man on the earth and his heart was filled with pain.”

Men are created in the image of God but they can become demonic.

The Good News I have for you today, however, is that there is another kind of beauty which God has bestowed upon His creation—a beauty which surpasses pastures and cathedrals and art and music.

It is the beauty of God's love for mankind which was displayed in the life and death of His Son, Jesus Christ.

That love—God's love—transcends all human love and can conquer all inhuman evil.

It is a love which sustains our fallen creation and will one day give birth to a new creation.

And I saw an example of that love at work in Germany.

After Germany was defeated by the allied forces and its horrific persecution of the Jews came to light, trials for war crimes were conducted at Nurenburg.

Nazi leaders who were convicted and were either imprisoned or hung and the book was closed on WW2.

What followed was a twenty-year silence in Germany in regard to the holocaust.

Whether from shame or guilt or resentment, the holocaust was not only excluded from public discourse but was not included in the teaching of German history in the schools.

Then in 1965 the leaders of Germany had a change of heart.

The leaders began to speak openly about the evil the 3rd Reich had perpetrated upon the Jews.

Concentration camps were identified and exhibited as evidence of German crimes against the Jews.

The movement gained force, the German people began to join in admitting their guilt and Germany began to repent of its evil actions.

They embarked upon concrete ways to express their repentance.

In the city of Cologne, for example, there are round brass plaques embedded in sidewalks inscribed with the names of Jews who were sent to concentration camps.

They are called “stolpersteine” which means “stumbling stones” and is related to the term “stumbling blocks” which is used in the Bible to refer to acts which are an offense to God.

The city has also declared “holocaust denial” to be illegal and punishable by fines or imprisonment.

And in other financially substantive ways, Germany to this day is taking responsibility for its war crimes.

What has taken place in Germany is nothing less than a nation repenting of its sins.

Does that repentance undo the crimes it committed?

No.

Does it restore life to any of the 6 million Jews who perished?

No.

Repentance cannot undo sin.

But it can and it does cleanse the heart of the sinner and restore his innocence before God.

Repentance is a work of love—of God's love at work in the hearts and minds of sinful people.

And that's a beautiful thing.

Amen.

