



King Thrushbeard and Christ

ONE OF THE GRIMM BROTHERS' lesser known fairy tales is *King Thrushbeard*. The story opens with a king who had a daughter "who was beautiful beyond all measure, but so proud and haughty that no suitor was good enough for her." One day, the king invited all the noblemen from far and near to a great banquet so his daughter could choose a husband. In keeping with her character, the princess found fault with them all yet she was especially disdainful towards a certain king whose beard was a little crooked. "Well, she cried and laughed, 'he has a chin like a thrush's beak!'" and henceforth he was nicknamed "King Thrushbeard."

Her father, however, was not amused and, in anger, swore that he would marry her off to the first beggar that knocked at his door. A few days later, a poor fiddler came and sang for alms. The king invited him in and, true to his word, gave him his daughter as a wife, much to her horror. He then sent her away from the castle; a beggar-woman to live with her beggar-husband.

On the way to the poor man's hovel, the princess noticed beautiful meadows, towns and woods and asked who owned them. The fiddler replied that they belonged to King Thrush-

beard. The poor girl could only lament not having married him when she had the chance. Yet this was only the beginning of her miseries. As the wife of a poor laborer, she was expected to work; a thing unheard of for a king's daughter! She knew nothing of lighting a fire or cooking. When they used up all their provisions, her husband had her earn money by weaving baskets, then by spinning, and finally by selling pots and earthenware. But weaving and spinning she could not do with her delicate hands and the pots and earthenware business was shattered by a drunken horseman (a hussar) who ran over her market stand. In the end, she found work in the local king's palace. "The king's daughter was now a kitchen maid, and had to be at the cook's beck-and-call, and do the dirtiest work. In both her pockets she fastened a little jar, in which she took home her share of the leavings, and upon this they lived."

One day, she heard that the king's son was going to celebrate his marriage, so she found a place by the door to peek at the people coming into the hall. There she saw the most beautiful people entering with pomp and "she thought of her lot with a sad heart, and cursed the pride and haughtiness which had humbled her and brought her to so great a poverty."



Suddenly, she spotted the king's son clothed in velvet and silk and adorned with gold chains, and recognized that it was King Thrushbeard, her old suitor. Despite her attempts to hide, he seized her by the hand and would have danced with her but her struggle to flee caused the jars in her pockets to fall out and spatter soup and scraps everywhere. "When the people saw it, there arose general laughter and derision," and she tried to run away, but King Thrushbeard caught her and brought her back. He said to her kindly, 'Do not be afraid, I and the fiddler who has been living with you in that wretched hovel are one. For love of you, I disguised myself so. And I was also the hussar who rode through your crockery. This was all done to humble your proud spirit, and to punish you for the insolence with which you mocked me.' Then she wept bitterly and said, 'I have done great wrong, and am not worthy to be your wife.'

In this story, we find an allegory of Christ's incarnation and His dealings with the individual soul. Like King Thrushbeard, he "disguised [himself] so" out of love for us, emptying Himself, "taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men." (Phil 2:7) Often the magnitude of this "emptying" is missed on us. Indeed, King Thrushbeard's humility in donning the clothes of a poor man and living in poverty can't compare to what the Son of God did in His incarnation. Recall that the difference between God and His creatures is *infinite*. If it could be measured in miles, it would be like seeing a shimmering star in the night sky and, after travelling billions of light years, finding that it has not changed the least in size. That God would deign to take on our human nature, the least of His rational creatures, boggles the mind!

And what response did he receive? Little more than abuse and derision: "And kneeling before him they mocked him, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!'" (Matt 27:29) If this is true of humanity in general, it is also true of the individual soul. We are indeed children of a great king, created in His image and likeness and yet, thanks to our fallen nature, we are also proud and haughty like the king's daughter. It takes much grace, effort and time to grow in humility and have the mind of Christ within us, "who, though he was in the form of God ... emptied him-

self, taking the form of a servant ... and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross." (Phil 2:5-8) Whenever we choose sin over Christ, we mock Him Who loved us even to the point of shedding His blood for us.

Christ became man and died for love for us yet His work did not end there. We are inclined to forget that, as King of all creation, He continues to rule our lives by His Divine Providence, guiding them (if we permit Him!) towards eternal happiness with Him. Too often we, like the princess in the story, are humbled against our wills and yet it is for our greater good. We tend to focus on the humiliations and misfortunes cursing "the pride and haughtiness which had humbled [us] and brought [us] to so great a poverty," and missing the reason behind it all: "For love of you..."

How can we better respond to the humbling work of God? It helps to renew our faith in His love for us, especially when we are least aware of it, and entrust ourselves to His care. We believe that God is all-powerful, infinite wisdom and infinite love. That combination alone should assure us that nothing happens in our lives without God's power, wisdom and love being present, regardless of how we feel. In fact, if we were to learn to recognize Christ in all the events of our lives, we should soon realize that He is always with us; that no moment in our lives is too small to escape His loving attention. As He assures us in His last words in St. Matthew's Gospel: "I am with you always, to the close of the age." (28:20)

In the end, our eternal happiness is worth the trouble. As St. Paul put it, "For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison" (2 Cor 4:17). Or, as the story of King Thrushbeard ends: "But he said, 'Be comforted, the evil days are past. Now we will celebrate our wedding.' Then the maids-in-waiting came in and put on her the most splendid clothing, and her father and his whole court came and wished her happiness in her marriage with King Thrushbeard, and the joy now began in earnest. I wish you and I had been there too."

And so we may hope, having been invited and led there by the Bridegroom Himself. ❖

