



Raising Specks to the Spectacular

O the dignity of that small speck of human dust,
Taken by the jewel of heavenly excellence
To raise us from the clay of earth to heaven's height!
Gertrude the Great (1256-1302)

Gertrude the Great was a nun in the great Benedictine abbey of Helfta in Saxony. There she was one of a group of medieval women who later came to be known as “the scholars of Helfta” because of their extraordinary writings and mystical devotions. Gertrude’s prayer brings together two paradoxical aspects of our human existence – our insignificance in the grand scheme of things, and our dignity. Her lovely metaphor for each of us as “that small speck of human dust” is even more relevant today than it was when Gertrude composed her poem in the late 13th century.

Last time I checked, the world’s population was around 6.8 billion people, and increasing at a rate of about 3 people per second. In the (population) scheme of things, a human individual is very insignificant indeed.¹ And if that isn’t sobering enough, consider the fact that our Sun is only one of billions of stars in billions of galaxies in the universe. The total number of stars is calculated to be greater than all the grains of sand on Earth. Our Milky Way galaxy alone has about 400 billion stars. In effect, we’re a speck on a speck (Earth) in a spectacularly vast universe.

Julian of Norwich, the great 14th century English mystic was given a view of Earth’s smallness and insignificance in one of her “Revelations of Divine Love”. She explains that she was shown “a little thing, the size of a hazel nut, lying in the palm of my hand”. As she looked at it, she wondered what it could be and she was answered that “It is all that is made”. Julian admits that she was amazed that all of creation is so inconsequential and she was anxious about having the responsibility of holding it in her hand because she thought that “it might suddenly have fallen into nothingness because it was so little”. Julian’s anxiety is soothed when she is told that creation endures, and will continue to endure, because God loves it. It is a simple statement and yet it’s possibly the only answer that makes any sense: love endures.

We cannot hope to truly comprehend the vastness and complexity of our universe but we can understand, from our own everyday human experience, what it is to love someone. In loving others we acknowledge their humanness. We accept the good and negative attributes of their personality, the annoying habits, the inconsistencies and pettiness, the humour and kindness, the bad temper, the fears, the thoughtfulness, the failings, the strengths and weaknesses of those we love. In our enduring love for them, we raise them up in our own estimation and, as a consequence, they are also raised in their own view. And we, in turn, are raised up by the love of our family and friends.

¹ See <http://www.ibiblio.org/lunarbin/worldpop>

We shouldn't be surprised, then, that Jesus – that “jewel of heavenly excellence” in Gertrude's prayer – in joining us on this speck of Earth and in dying and rising, raises us by affirming, with limitless love, our human dignity.

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