

And I, if I be lifted up . . .

At 7:30 PM, back in my seminary days, the bell of St. Francis Chapel at Graymoor would toll, summoning us to recite Psalm 130 on behalf of the dead. It begins in Latin: *De profundis clamavi ad te Domine* (Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord). Poets have used those opening words as a title for poems expressive of their own sadness. For example the 19th century English poet Christina Rossetti used it, of whom I'm proud to say her ancestry goes back to my grandparents' birthplace in the Adriatic province of Abruzzo in Italy, where a monument to her father, the poet Gabriele Rossetti, graces the town of Vasto's central piazza.

In her poem "De Profundis" Christina feels as down and out as the composer of Psalm 130: *Oh why is heaven built so far, / Oh why is earth set so remote? / I cannot reach the nearest star / That hangs afloat. // I would not care to reach the moon, / One round monotonous of change; / Yet even she repeats her tune / Beyond my range.* Obviously when Christina wrote that, she was, as we might say, "in the pits" - which reminds me of so many other biblical lamentations that use the same image, like Psalm 88: *My soul is surfeited with troubles . . . ; I am numbered with those who go down into the pit!*

Have you ever been in the pits, gotten yourself into a hole - like the biblical Joseph whose envious brothers dropped him down a cistern or like the prophet Jeremiah who wound up in the same fix? Or like Sancho Panza in *Don Quixote*, who after stumbling one night with his ass Dapple into a very deep hole saw the light of dawn far above him and *made a vigorous Outcry, . . . But, alas! all his Calling was in vain, . . . and then he gave himself over for dead and buried.*

That is, until Don Quixote came along and almost stumbled into the same pit himself. Then he heard this doleful tone: *Ho; above there! Is there no good Christian that hears me, no charitable Knight or Gentleman that will take Pity of a Sinner buried alive.* Once Don Quixote was convinced (by the distinctive braying of Dapple) that it was indeed his squire calling, he went off to get ropes and laborers to draw Sancho out and restore him *from that gloomy Pit, to the full Enjoyment of the Light of the Sun.*

In the Gospel reading assigned for today we hear Jesus saying, *When I am lifted up from the earth I will draw all things to myself.* And what do we see every Sunday when we assemble before our altar at the high point of the Mass but the same Christ lifted up as bread and wine, as Christ himself? And to what end but to serve as a magnet to draw us out of the pits we've fallen into, the holes we've dug for ourselves by our harboring of resentments, our worrying, pouting, immersing ourselves in trivia - in other words resisting the potency of Christ and his Gospel to make us magnetic persons ourselves?

Christina Rossetti continued her lament: *I never watch the scattered fire / Of stars, or sun's far-trailing train, / But all my heart is one desire, / And all in vain: // For I am bound with fleshly bands, / Joy, beauty, lie beyond my scope; / I strain my*

heart, I stretch my hands, / And catch at hope. But Christina, don't you realize that the heart's strain, your stretching forth of hands, your reflex of hope are but your sensation of Christ's magnetic attraction - drawing you "out of the depths"? That being the case, can joy and beauty be so far beyond your reach, when you are never far beyond the gracious reach of Christ?