

There was nobody there . . .

How many examinations have you undergone in the course of your life? They started for me in the first grade and then year after year, several times a year through elementary school. Then high school and with ever more stress through college and graduate school – the sweat pouring out during exams undergone before scowling boards of experts . . . This is to say nothing of health examinations, the waiting rooms, the anxiety over tests to be taken; so many interviews, right down to drivers' tests seated beside a burly police officer watching your every move: "That turn was too wide, fella. Watch it the next time."

One could go on. I won't even mention the examinations of conscience we were encouraged to exercise upon ourselves and the frequent thought of our judgment before God some day – with all the universe watching! Keeps you under constant expectation of failing if not today then tomorrow. The inner and outer trials go on and on and take their toll, turn you into a constant judge of others, a grouch. Will I ever be perfect? Will others be perfect? Of course not! And then I read a funny poem by R.S. Thomas, a now deceased Welsh clergyman, called *Illusory Arrival*, which goes:

*Who was the janitor
with the set face, wardening
the approaches? I had prepared
my apologies, my excuses*

*for coming by the wrong
road. There was no one
there, only the way
I had come by going on and on.*

I say it was funny because for all his worrying about meeting the doorkeeper, the examiner, for whom you and I have spent our lives preparing excuses and apologies for our failings, it turns out there is no gatekeeper, no toll booth, no final examination awaiting us! Our way of life is open, clear to the point where we, like the poet, may even be disappointed after all the effort we put into preparing to meet some judge and plead our case.

It's true the Old Testament does set us up about retribution descending upon the wicked like the story about the fortune-teller Balaam whose donkey sees and informs him of an angel with a drawn sword blocking his way. But with the arrival of Christ we find out true God transcends interrogation; God is more interested in conversation. God becomes love, grace; Christ becomes *the Way*; a Way of serious, intense mercy and understanding. As in the episode of the woman who made the mistake of committing adultery and Jesus remains silent amid the interrogation and accusations of the Pharisees who are out for blood. Yet it's only after they leave in shame that Jesus speaks, saying to the woman: *Where are they? Has no one condemned you? She replied, No one, sir. Then Jesus said, Neither do I condemn you. Go and don't be taken advantage of any more.*

Of course the poet R.S. Thomas, a Christian and Nobel Prize nominee, may not really think he'll meet *no one* on the way. Indeed composers of more popular lyrics often tell the whole story as in: *When you walk through a storm hold your head up high / and don't be afraid of the dark . . . walk on through the wind . . . through the rain . . . with hope in your heart . . . you'll never walk alone.*