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A Willing Sacrifice - Sir Gawain and *the Dream of the Rood*

Through two tales, *The Dream of the Rood* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, there stand figures of courage, redemption and atonement. In this rendition of Christ's crucifixion the cross takes it upon himself to give a first person view of the Savior in his final moments. In the telling of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* the same glorified characteristics come forward, coincidentally as he travels to his own execution. Both Christ and Sir Gawain go willingly to their death for honor and to atone for sins; Christ for the good of all mankind, Gawain for his own honor and that of his comitatus.

The rood (the cross), as a first person witness to the bravery of Christ, says, "I saw the lord of mankind coming with great haste so that he might climb up on me" (Page 33, line 33-34). This simple sentence shows extreme courage and almost anticipation for death. Just a few sentences further the rood states, "Then this young man stripped himself...strong and courageous; he climbed up on the high gallows, brave in the sight of many, as he set out to redeem mankind, I trembled when the man embraced me" (Page 34, line 39-42). Christ goes to his death although his powers over nature could have stopped this event; even his Father in Heaven would have stopped his sons suffering if asked. The rood expresses his own willingness to fall to the earth and strike down Christ's attackers but remains standing as homage to his Kings wishes. With such great courage Christ became a symbol of willing sacrifice, the savior of mankind because he knew what had to be done and made it so.

Sir Gawain goes through a similar sacrifice when the Green Knight barges in on the New Year feast and proposes a game of sorts. He also insults Arthur's men, "...the bodies on these benches are just bum-fluffed bairns. If I'd ridden to your castle rigged out for a ruck these lightweight men wouldn't last a minute" (280-282). What a disgrace to all the knights and most of all to Arthur himself. This stranger judges the men to be nothing more than infants, easy to slaughter if only it were not New Year's Eve. This slap to the face must be answered for any honor to be regained. "So who has the gall? The gumption? The guts? Who'll spring from his seat and snatch this weapon?" (291-292) the Green Knight asks. The insults have gone too far and when no one speaks up Arthur takes it upon him to play the game. This, in many ways, is worse for the knights than losing the game. First he insults the men, then Arthur, and finally undermines the comitatus completely. The King is supposed to support his brave men, not be a human shield to them.

Gawain unrolls this mess in an eloquent speech. "For I find it unfitting, as my fellow knights would, when a deed of such daring is dangled before us that you take on this trial – tempted as you are – when brave, bold men are seated on these benches...[those] never beaten...in the field of battle" (348-353). He never points out the cowardice of the men but their strengths. He takes the challenge while in essence 'denying' Arthur the joy of playing the game. Sir Gawain has honor to spare as he saves all the knights from shame and glorifies his King by swinging the ax. His bravery only becomes more apparent when instead of heeding his servant's advice and running away from his own death he marches proudly like a lamb to the slaughter. He embraces his fate just as Christ embraced the cross. By not backing down from his promise to the Green Knight one year ago Gawain restores honor for himself and his life-lord, Arthur. He proves once and for all that Arthur's men keep their word and are unafraid of fate.

Furthermore, in each poem the willingly sacrificial character returns to their world with restored honor, atonement for sin and a remembrance of the experience. Christ opened the gates to heaven, atoned for the sins of mankind and retains the scars on hands, feet and side to commemorate the sacrifice. Sir Gawain daringly took it upon himself to restore honor back to Arthur and the other knights, bared his neck for the rightful blow of the ax and returned with girdle and scar. Each man stands as a pinnacle of righteousness as they continue down their fated path. In the end, *The Dream of the Rood* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* coincide on crucial doctrine. They prove that as long as the good of the whole remains forefront in one's mind, redemption is possible.

References

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