

The Mouth of Truth



***Nightwings* by Robert Silverberg is set on Earth in a future in which all human beings have a vocation and are subject to 'the Will'. The vocation they are born to places them in a Guild and human life is therefore organised into the work done and hospitality provided by the Guilds. People without Guilds are therefore the homeless ones, refugees, the lost and the lonely.**

The story is about a man who is a member of the Guild of Watchers. The task of Watchers is to search the skies through their instruments for signs of any alien invasion. They are called to this vocation through a deep conviction that aliens will one day come and take over the earth which they own by means of a treaty made long ago and humans must therefore stay awake and be vigilant. They search the skies through a deeply empathic sense which allows them to detect any hostility directed at Earth's people.

The Watcher of the story is accompanied in his travels by a Flier, a young girl with wings a bit like an angel or a fairy. The Watcher is in love with her, but he doesn't tell her that. He just provides care and companionship. He is also accompanied by a Guildless person, Gorman, whom he pities and for whom he obtains board and lodging by having him travel with him.

Gorman however constantly niggles away at the Watcher's vocation, testing his faith. He asks him if he really believes the aliens are coming; if he is really wasting his time; if his vocation is real. He points out that if the Watcher does sense anything out there his life is over. The Watcher puts up with this, but, little by little, the words start to hit home and he becomes less sure of what his faith and vocation are for. A crisis comes when a religious Pilgrim offers to take him to Jorslem [Jerusalem] to seek renewal and redemption but to leave his companions behind [In a later extension of the original story he does go to Jorslem and is renewed]. He elects to go on to Roum [Rome] with his two companions, hoping also to find spiritual refreshment there.

Eventually they come to Roum and find the spiritual and cultural centre of humanity doesn't care about them. The Watcher is ignored and the Flier taken forcibly by the arrogant Prince of Roum. They come to the Mouth of Truth, now fitted with real lie detectors and a very real limb severer. Gorman asks the Watcher if his life has been a waste and he admits that it has, then Gorman thrusts his hand into it and tells the Watcher the Truth. He, Gorman, is not a changeling but an alien envoy, sent to overthrow human vigilance and ensure a bloodless coup. The Watcher is appalled, but Gorman tells him that the invasion is coming and reminds him that he has grown careless and forgotten his watch. The Watcher runs to his instruments and there they are, the alien invaders. He calls the alarm but it is too late, the invasion happens. Yet the invaders are not hostile and evil, but gentle and indifferent, taking over Earth with a kind of apologetic shrug. The Watcher, his life over, struggles to make sense of it all, and departs with the Prince of Roum, now blinded by Gorman in revenge for taking the Flier.

This story raises a number of questions which are relevant to spiritual exploration, mission and social justice.

These are:

- ⊕ Does humanity and empathy, the desire to care for others, distract Christians from 'pure' mission, the focus on a goal beyond our lifetime? There is a scene in the story when Gorman interrupts the Watcher at his watching, causing him mental pain and disrupting his ability to focus on his bigger task.
- ⊕ Is the mission of the Church arrogant and finally blind, or does it make assumptions about what God's purpose and intention actually are?
- ⊕ Does the Christian search for social justice weaken or undermine vocation or the need to exile oneself for greater purpose?
- ⊕ Does mission theology actually bother with God's social purposes, a real Kingdom theology, and what it might look like, or does it just wait for the invasion, - God's rule on earth or the second coming?
- ⊕ What is the function of love for God and love for human beings in Christian mission and social justice?
- ⊕ Are we equipped to handle the Truth, especially if it doesn't look like what we want it to be?