

Lord (John 20. 24-31)

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We come to the final part of our Advent series exploring the meaning of Jesus in the light of the work of Rene Girard and James Alison. In previous weeks, we've reflected on what it means to call Jesus our brother, teacher and saviour. Tonight I want to focus on the New Testament confession that Jesus is Lord. It's a confession intrinsically connected with the experience of receiving new life through Christ, the experience of being recreated.

I said last week that one of Girard's profound contributions has been to identify a universal mechanism by which human groups and individuals shore up their fragile sense of identity and deal with internal threat, division and tension. The mechanism is the sacrifice of a scapegoat, 'a gathering together of all at the expense of a randomly selected one'.¹ From school playgrounds to toxic workplaces, from nationalistic racism to moralistic religion, we see all too routinely a dynamic whereby those who are weak or different, those who are deemed 'transgressors' of one sort or another, are singled out as the people over against whom the 'in group' defines itself and reinforces its togetherness.

Some of us have been victims of this mechanism. We've been the ones bullied, excluded, expelled, our 'difference' deemed unacceptable, our reputations traduced so that our expulsion appeared justified, necessary. Some of us have been perpetrators of it – maybe only realizing years later what we did to the 'kid with glasses' in the playground, or recognizing that (while ostensibly defending true religion and moral order) we've actually been part a self-righteous lynch mob. Almost all of us have been bystanders at one time or another as the mechanism was

¹ James Alison, 'On learning to say "Jesus is Lord": a "girardian" confession' in *Faith Beyond Resentment: fragments catholic and gay* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001), pp.147-169, p.152.

unleashed. We might not have picked up stones to throw ourselves, but out of fear for our jobs, our reputations, our own vulnerability, we let it happen to someone else, keeping our heads down, just glad it wasn't us. This mechanism, suggests Girard, is at the foundation of all human culture, religion and social life. The price of generating any in-group, any human system of goodness and belonging is the sacrifice of victims who are deemed to be dangerous, transgressive, evil or contaminating – the necessary 'them' to our 'us'.

It's against this background that we suddenly glimpse what an extraordinary story is told in the gospels. Jesus, writes James Alison, 'shows perfectly well by word and by action that he understands this mechanism, understands the religious and political structures which depend on it and shore it up'.² And he goes about deliberately subverting it. He dangerously re-includes many who've been conveniently dispatched to the 'outside' – the supposedly unclean, unrighteous and alien. He makes no effort to stay on the right side of the religious and civil authorities, which has the effect of turning him into a target for the mechanism. Where we do almost anything we can to avoid being singled out in this way, it's as if, says Alison, Jesus 'lures it into behaving according to its usual pattern'. Which, indeed, it does. Jesus is accused of blasphemy and handed over to be killed, one man sacrificed (as the high priest Caiaphas says) for the sake of the nation (John 11.50). The mechanism appears to triumph – the old order safely secured.

But then comes the twist in the tail. Unlike all the other victims, Jesus does not remain silenced, banished. He returns to the disciples in the resurrection and with this bewildering, disorienting experience, they begin to see what has happened in a whole new light. Instead of seeing Jesus as his accusers had portrayed him, his failure evidence of his being cursed by God, they start to understand his deliberateness in relation to the whole process. They remember the way he avoided being trapped until 'his hour had come'. John's gospel has him say: 'For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one

² Alison, 'On learning to say "Jesus is Lord"', pp.152-153.

takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father' (John 10. 18). As Alison remarks, it's as if Jesus incites the mechanism 'in order to reveal that it is not necessary, that God is in no way involved in [it], and that those who are of God are born again into a form of social gathering which is in no way dependent on this mechanism'.³

Last week, I spoke about how this recasts our understanding of salvation. From this perspective to say that Jesus 'died for our sins' is not about God demanding a sacrifice from Jesus so as to let us off being punished. Rather, Jesus freely consents to become our victim so as to reveal the true character of this scapegoating mechanism and to release us from being run by it. No wonder, when Thomas encounters the crucified and risen Jesus, he exclaims: 'My Lord and my God!' The power, the creative energy, that is capable of living this out looks remarkably like the power of God. It is 'the power to be peaceful and creative in the midst of non-being, which is a power no human has'.⁴

Notice also the effect on how we hear the language in which the New Testament expresses our redemption. New life through Christ, being born again from above, being recreated – these aren't referring to paranormal happenings on some ethereal plane, but have very particular anthropological meaning. It's the lived experience of being liberated from the death-dealing, death-dominated ways we go about generating and securing our identities and human communities. The mechanism works ultimately because we are all afraid of the place of the non-person, we're all avoiding being humiliated, shamed, victimized and ultimately killed off – whether socially or literally. But what Jesus does is to make this space habitable, to reveal that God is with us in the midst of it, that it has no ultimate power.⁵ In, through and with him, we find ourselves more and more able to let go of

³ Alison, 'On learning to say "Jesus is Lord"', pp.152-153.

⁴ James Alison, 'The place of shame and the giving of the Spirit' in *Undergoing God: dispatches from the scene of a break-in* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2006), pp.199-219, p.206.

⁵ Alison, 'The place of shame and the giving of the Spirit', p.205.

trying secure ourselves on the right side of all the systems of the world. The more that happens, the more we're able to inhabit the place of death and shame without being run by it and so be in solidarity with victims, co-creators with Christ of authentically inclusive fellowship.

Mostly, of course, this doesn't happen all at once. It involves a long process of recognizing the many and subtle forms of our entanglement in the 'mechanism', and the often excruciating work of being liberated – sometimes by means of our own descent to the space of failure, shame, rejection and despair. 'This is why we are baptized into Christ's death'.⁶ The whole point of discipleship is to be led by Jesus through the death of these false forms of identity and belonging, which are always implicated in some form of violence to ourselves and others. As we consent to this process, writes Alison, 'we find that the same set of attitudes, patterns of desire and imagination that enabled Jesus to do what he did, are given to us. This giving is called the Holy Spirit, and by it we can inhabit, dwell in, the same space of shame, of the curse, of death, but as if these things were nothing, thus contributing to keeping alive the possibility of the goodness and vivacity of God being made available to us humans here on this earth'.⁷

Within a week we celebrate the feast of Christmas. We celebrate Jesus coming to the inside of our lives so that we might come to the inside of God's life. What that looks like, humanly speaking, is being liberated from our rivalry and fear of one another. It looks like being able to participate in the creative love that generates life not over against, but out of nothing – freely, spaciouly, abundantly. You well know that we live in a world ever more wracked by violence and destructive rivalry, by the shoring up of group and national identity at the expense of random victims. Christmas reminds us that it need not be so; that God so loved the world that he gave his Son to set us free from this way of being together. May Christ be born afresh in our hearts so there may indeed be peace on earth and goodwill among all people.

⁶ Alison, 'The place of shame and the giving of the Spirit', p.208.

⁷ Alison, 'The place of shame and the giving of the Spirit', p.208.