

**Zeal (Philippians 3. 3b-14)**

Sarah Bachelard

Religious ‘zeal’ is something our culture tends to be suspicious of – and rightly so. Religious zeal easily tips over into cruel intolerance and violence. In the terrible deeds of the Islamic State, we are witnessing what purports to be an expression of ‘zeal’ for Allah and the faith of Islam – though its claims to represent that faith have been categorically rejected by Islamic teachers and leaders around the world. In Christian history, supposed zeal for the faith drove the Crusades, the Wars of Religion, and the murder of thousands of women accused of witchcraft in Europe and North America, just to name a few cases. And we don’t have to look as far afield as that to recognise a nasty kind of zealotry at work in our tradition. I have encountered divorced or single parents who have been shunned by others in a so-called Christian school in Canberra, gay men and women made unwelcome in churches, and all this in the name of preserving the ‘purity’ and righteousness of a fellowship which takes its faith (so it says) seriously. It’s no wonder that some see this kind of intolerance and sectarian violence as inherent in the nature of religious faith, and consider that we’d be better off without it.

For us, it seems to me, the problem raised by nasty religious zealotry is the question of whether there can be such a thing as ‘good’ or ‘healthy’ zealotry (after all, wasn’t it said of Jesus, ‘zeal for my father’s house has consumed me’?) (John 2. 17). Or, to put it another way, how do we distinguish between radical discipleship (which we could all do with a lot more of) and dangerous religious fanaticism? Our reading from Paul’s letter to the Philippians is profoundly helpful in this regard.

Some context: Paul has been encouraging the community at Philippi in their newfound Christian faith and warning them against false teachers – in particular, against those who say that being in right relationship with God is dependent upon adherence to the Law, and particularly the Jewish ritual practice of circumcision. Paul could have made his own claim to righteousness along these very lines. ‘If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh’, he writes, ‘I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless’ (Phil. 3. 4b-6). But all these supposed gains, Paul says, he has ‘come to regard’ or to reckon, ‘as loss because of Christ’.

Now one way of reading this would be to think that Paul was telling the Philippians he had been mistaken in the *content* of his previous religious commitment. He used to think that what mattered to God was being one of the chosen people, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; and that what God liked about him was that he had undergone circumcision, fiercely defended his religious system in the face of novelty and strictly followed the rules. Now, he realises that was not the right religion practice after all – none of that pedigree counts, and what matters is ‘knowing Christ Jesus’ as his Lord.

Well, Paul is saying something like that ... but we misunderstand his meaning if we take him simply to be replacing one religious system with another, as if we are left with the same basic religious structure, just filled with different content – a new name for God, some new rules to follow, a new system to defend. But what is going on is much more radical than that. Paul has come to understand that faith in Jesus is not new content for the same old legalistic, sacrificial platform, but actually undoes his whole former way of being religious, his whole way of securing his righteousness. How does it do that? The contrast is between what Paul calls seeking a ‘righteousness of my own that comes from the law’ and ‘the righteousness from God based on faith’. Let me unpack that a bit.

When we seek a righteousness of our own, we tend to think that it is what we do that secures our standing before God and heals what is alienated and unlovely in us. It is *our* law keeping, *our* cultic observance, our belonging to the in-group, that does the heavy spiritual lifting. But there are two problems with this approach. For one thing, as Paul knew from his own experience, those who are righteous according to the law, or who possess (as they think) a goodness of their own, are all too likely to end up condemning or casting out those they consider unrighteous. Thinking they are righteous they end up becoming persecutors and murderers – as Paul did, as the court that condemned Jesus did, as those who stoned the prophets did. (And as we do with various forms of subtle social violence).

And second, what we need to be saved from, healed of, is precisely this tendency we have to a violent self-righteousness, the way it separates us from each other, and our refusal to see this truth about ourselves. What needs healing in us is our sense of lack, our fear of death, failure and shame – and the way we try to cover up this lack and fear by trying to look good or be successful, or by blaming someone else, or playing the victim, or securing our possessions, or projecting our self-hatred and anger. But if this is what we need to be healed of, then a religion of self-righteousness can't help. In fact, it will simply become part of the mechanism that keeps us locked in alienation. It will delude us into thinking that if we just try harder, do all the right things, look like we've got it together, and keep out the people that threaten us – then we'll be all right. And maybe God will think so too.

Jesus reveals the lie and the ungodliness in all of this. In doing so, he reveals a radically different possibility for being religious. In fact, it is so radically different that theologian James Alison calls Christianity a strange kind of 'unreligion' (though in practice, we have all too often been just another old-style 'religion'). By suffering the consequences of our religious self-righteousness, Jesus showed us that God's love for us is nothing to do with our religious performance. In fact, Jesus showed us that God's love for us has most unimpeded access and power to transform just when we

are in the place we fear the most and that feels the most unholy – the place of failure, shame, and death. And that means that to follow Jesus, to accept this faith, involves learning not to cling to a righteousness of our own, and to entrust ourselves to God – naked, open, humble. In this broad and spacious place, you receive your belonging as gift. You need not fear being judged or not making it; we can be in solidarity with those we otherwise avoid for fear of contagion – the ‘sinful’, the unwashed, those who wear hijabs or are of Middle Eastern appearance. To follow Jesus, to be religious as Jesus is religious, teaches us to recognise others as brothers and sisters, all of them (however alien they might seem).

Zeal for this faith – for this possibility of human being and belonging – cannot then be expressed in violent disregard for others, by imposing my moral, religious or political ideology through force. To do that is to deny it at its very core. Discipleship of Jesus undoes in us zealotry of the self-righteous variety, and grows in us a different kind of zeal which Paul expresses as the desire to ‘know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death’. This is not religious triumphalism, but its subversion from within.

And it affects how we hear the muscular language of ‘pressing on’ and ‘straining forward toward the goal’ at the end of our passage. Even here, Paul ‘presses on’ not out of his own resources but because, he says, ‘Christ Jesus has made me his own’. How? By revealing the murderous character of his religious self-righteousness, calling him to solidarity with those deemed of no account, through imprisonment, suffering and humiliation. Radical discipleship of the crucified is a radical fellowship with the vulnerable and oppressed, including fellowship with what is vulnerable and oppressed in ourselves. It is reconciling and loving, the power of God for the healing of the world. It makes us more human, simply here, free to be without fear. There is radical discipleship and there is self-righteous religiosity. It matters that we know the difference – it’s the difference between life and death.