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Attention: Simone Weil (Luke 11: 1-13)

Sarah Bachelard

So far in our series, Mystic Winter, we've focused on lovers of God from the mediaeval and early modern periods; Meister Eckhart and Julian of Norwich from the 14th century, John of the Cross from the 16th. Tonight we move much closer to our own time, to encounter the life and thought of Simone Weil, a profoundly politically engaged mystical thinker of the 20th century.

A writer, philosopher and activist, Weil was born in 1909 in Paris to a cultivated Jewish family. She qualified as a teacher of philosophy in 1931, graduating from the Sorbonne in the same class as Simone de Beauvoir. She began her professional life teaching philosophy in girls' schools and during that time participated actively in the workers' movement, writing for political journals and teaching miners at night school. In 1934, between teaching posts, she went to work at the Renault factory on the outskirts of Paris, 'fulfilling (she said) her long held desire to "escape from abstractions, to be among men and women"'.¹

This, as it turned out, was a devastating experience. In her spiritual autobiography she wrote that although she knew quite well there was a great deal of affliction in the world, she had not had prolonged and first-hand experience of it. But, she writes, '[a]s I worked in the factory, indistinguishable to all eyes, including my own, from the anonymous mass, this affliction of others entered into my flesh and my soul. Nothing separated me from it, for I had really forgotten my past and I looked forward to no future ... What I went through there marked me in so lasting a manner that still today when any human being ... speaks to me without brutality, I cannot help having the impression that there must be a mistake ... There I received forever the mark of a slave ...'.²

¹ Samantha Bews, 'Simone Weil' in *Heroes of the Faith*, ed. Roland Ashby (Melbourne: Garratt Publishing, 2015), p.268.

² Simone Weil, *Waiting on God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (London: Fontana Books, 1959), p.33.

In 1936, Weil joined an anarchist militia and spent three months or so with the Spanish Republican Army fighting the fascists in the Spanish civil war. She was injured by boiling cooking oil, and spent the next period of her life travelling, writing and struggling with ill health, including the violent headaches from which she suffered all her life. In 1940, she fled Paris with her parents the day before the Nazis marched in, and lived for a time in Marseilles where she wrote, visited refugees in camps and distributed pamphlets for the Resistance. She left France for America in 1942 with the intention of forming a contingent of front-line nurses, but was recalled to London to serve in the French provisional government in England. There she wrote *The Need for Roots* – her study of the relationship between citizen and state which she hoped would form the basis for the reconstruction of France after the war. In August 1943, however, she collapsed, suffering from tuberculosis and malnourishment, since she refused to eat more than the rations given those in Occupied France. She died, according to the medical examiner in Kent, of self-starvation. She was 34 years old.³

The two great passions of Simone Weil's life were for truth and for living in solidarity with the least. Her radical uncompromisingness about these things made her not the most comfortable person to be around. Simone de Beauvoir wrote of her that: 'her intelligence, her asceticism, her total commitment and her sheer courage – all these filled me with admiration; though I knew that ... she would have been far from reciprocating my attitude'.⁴ Of their very first meeting in 1927, when they were both just 18 years old, de Beauvoir later wrote, 'I envied her for having a heart that could beat right across the world'.⁵

But how is it that this Jewish born political activist comes to be considered a mystic in the Christian tradition? One whom both Albert Camus and André Gide considered to be the most important spiritual writer of the century, and whom two successive popes – John XXIII and Paul VI – considered to be among the most

³ Bews, 'Simone Weil', p.268.

⁴ Richard H. Bell, *Simone Weil: The Way of Justice as Compassion* (Lanham, MY: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), p.xii.

⁵ Bell, *Simone Weil*, p.xii.

important influences on their spiritual development.⁶ It's to do, I think, with her practice of attention and the way this practice led her to encounter Christ in the depths of her own and the world's affliction.

Weil's great terror was that she might live falsely. At fourteen years of age, she fell into depression at the thought that 'because of the mediocrity of my natural faculties', she might never really be able to penetrate to the truth of things. She preferred to die rather than live without that truth, by which she meant also beauty, virtue and every kind of goodness. Then, she writes, after 'months of inward darkness, I suddenly had the everlasting conviction' that anyone, even those 'practically devoid of natural faculties' can enter the kingdom of truth 'if only he longs for truth and perpetually concentrates all his attention upon its attainment'.⁷ Essentially, she says, what had come to her was a conviction about the relationship between grace and desire, and that 'when one hungers for bread one does not receive stones' even though at that time she had not read the Gospel.⁸

So attention is the key to truth. And by attention, Weil means an other-directed and absolutely non-grasping concentration of awareness and receptivity. Prayer itself, in her understanding, consists of this – 'the orientation of all the attention of which the soul is capable towards God'.⁹ What makes attention so important is that it shifts the usually self-directed, inwardly focused energy of our consciousness to the other. And whether 'the other' is a problem in geometry, another person, or God, if we're really paying attention, then in that very act we are letting go of ourselves. True attention is a practice of self-emptying or kenosis. Weil says: 'Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty and ready to be penetrated by the object'.¹⁰

In school studies, all wrong translations, bad arguments and failed solutions in mathematics arise, in her view, when 'thought has seized upon some idea too hastily

⁶ Bell, *Simone Weil*, p.xii.

⁷ Weil, *Waiting on God*, p.30.

⁸ Weil, *Waiting on God*, p.31.

⁹ Weil, *Waiting on God*, p.66.

¹⁰ Weil, *Waiting on God*, p.72.

and being thus prematurely blocked, is not open to the truth'.¹¹ In the same way, in our relationship with others, attention is the condition of love – especially love for the afflicted. This is because only self-emptying attention makes room for the other to be. Take the man helped by the Good Samaritan. He has become little more than a nameless object bleeding in a ditch. Those who pass him by 'scarcely notice' and soon forget they even saw this 'object'. But the Good Samaritan 'stops and turns his attention towards it. The actions that follow are just the automatic effect of this moment of attention'. Weil says that when it's pure, that is, when it is truly other-centred, 'attention is creative'.¹² The Samaritan actually gives being to one who is wounded, his attention nourishes his soul. I'm reminded of the number of times in the gospels when Jesus is said to look, to look intently at those who call upon him.

Finally, in relation to God, this kind of self-emptying, non-attached attention is the condition of true encounter. Approached any other way, 'God' is likely to be something we make up to console ourselves. Because of her fear of falling into such pious falsehood, Weil had resisted formal religious belonging although she was drawn to the Catholic church and its liturgy. After a couple of powerful experiences of Christianity, she discovered George Herbert's poem, *Love*. She learnt this poem by heart and says that 'often at the culminating point of a violent headache, I make myself say it over, concentrating all my attention upon it ...'. In one of these recitations, she writes, 'Christ himself came down and took possession of me'. In this experience, she insists, 'neither my senses nor my imagination had any part'. She had never read the mystics and so 'had never foreseen the possibility of ... a real contact, person to person ... between a human being and God'. Yet in this contact, she 'felt in the midst of my suffering the presence of a love, like that which one can read in the smile on a beloved face'.¹³

Still she did not pray, fearful of the power of suggestion. But in the summer of 1941, while studying Greek, she learnt the Lord's prayer by heart. 'The infinite

¹¹ Weil, *Waiting on God*, p.72.

¹² Weil, *Waiting on God*, p.103.

¹³ Weil, *Waiting on God*, pp.35-36.

sweetness of this Greek text so took hold of me', she writes, 'that for several days I could not stop myself from saying it over all the time'. She adopted a practice of saying the 'Our Father' once through each morning 'with absolute attention. If during the recitation my attention wanders or goes to sleep, in the minutest degree, I begin again until I have once succeeded in going through it with absolutely pure attention'. What happens, she says, is extraordinary – she is transported outside her thoughts, to a vast and infinite dimension. 'At the same time, filling every part of this infinity of infinity, there is silence, a silence which is not an absence of sound but which is the object of a positive sensation ... Sometimes, ... Christ is present with me in person, but his presence is infinitely more real, more moving, more clear than on that first occasion when he took possession of me'.¹⁴

Weil refused baptism until the end of her life. She could not countenance being on the inside of a collectivity, supposedly catholic or universal, from which in fact vast numbers of people and vast swathes of human history were excluded. In a letter to her friend Father Perrin, she wrote: 'nothing gives me more pain than the idea of separating myself from the immense and unfortunate multitude of unbelievers'. Her vocation, she was convinced, was to remain in solidarity with those who are outside: 'I should betray the truth ... if I left the point where I have been since my birth, at the intersection of Christianity and everything that is not Christianity'.¹⁵

Yet it is precisely from this point of intersection that she speaks so powerfully to us. Her vocation was 'to show ... the possibility of a truly incarnated Christianity' – a Christ-like solidarity with the least, a Christ-like self-emptying and waiting on God. This is no easy vocation, and Weil could be a prickly and intransigent presence. Some of her contemporaries dismissed her – calling her the Red (Communist) Virgin – while some of our contemporaries label her a neurotic, anorexic. But Weil herself said of those who are afflicted and brought to nothing by the kind suffering that uproots a

¹⁴ Weil, *Waiting on God*, p.38.

¹⁵ Weil, *Waiting on God*, p.42.

life, that we may 'pass quite close to them without realising it ... We only notice that they have rather a strange way of behaving and we censure this behaviour'.¹⁶

For all her asceticism, Weil was a passionate lover of the world – and she gave herself utterly to the promise of life being abundant even for those whom the world cast aside as unimportant, anonymous, and dispensable. And that is how a Jewish born political activist comes to be a mystic in the Christian tradition, and a witness to the living Christ.

¹⁶ Weil, *Waiting on God*, p.78.