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### **Becoming Saints (Luke 6: 17-26)**

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Neil and I have just returned from our pilgrimage on the Way of St James. We walked from Lisbon to the cathedral at Santiago de Compostela in north-western Spain where the bones of St James himself are said to be housed. Then we walked in France, along another part of the same great pilgrimage network whose lines have radiated out across Europe for over a thousand years. Along the way, we encountered a vast host of the saints of the western church – not only St James, but also St Colette, St Vincent de Paul, St Michael and the recently canonized St Teresa of Calcutta, to name a few – their lives and service venerated in countless chapels, cathedrals and wayside shrines.

The concept of ‘sainthood’ has a mixed history in the Christian tradition. In Roman Catholic devotional practice, and particularly in mediaeval times, officially recognized saints were venerated enthusiastically if not, at times, extravagantly. By way of statues and paintings, sometimes improbable stories and collections of relics, the saints have been commended to the faithful as edifying examples of courage, obedience, vision and service. There’s much that’s strengthening about this practice of remembering our spiritual forebears and exemplars – but historically it has been vulnerable to a certain ‘over-heating’ and even manipulation by church hierarchies. The process of canonisation has at times been (maybe still is?) highly politicised and there’s also a risk that putting a designated few on this kind of spiritual pedestal ends up disempowering the many.

In reaction to these excesses and dangers, the Reformation tradition tended to emphasise something like the sainthood of all believers. I’ve sat through many an All Saints Day sermon whose theme was that all the faithful, all of us, are saints or at least proto-saints. There’s something important here too, in the insistence that

sanctification, holiness, is the vocation of all people – although a danger is that when all are said to be saints, then none are. We're left with no strong understanding of what sanctity really is, apart from a vague sense that saints are long-suffering ('she's a saint to put up with him'), and probably shouldn't be having too much fun.

It seems to me that the concept of sanctity, sainthood, is deeply significant for human life and that it's worth pondering what it's really about. Every spiritual tradition recognizes some as saints or elders, people who embody particular wisdom and whose very presence communicates peace and a kind of power. So, what does it mean to be, to become a saint? And if this is indeed part of the human vocation, the fulfilment of every life, what might it mean for us?

Thomas Merton, an American Trappist monk writing in the 1960s, answered this question in a very striking way. 'For me to be a saint', he says, 'means to be myself. Therefore the problem of sanctity ... is in fact the problem of finding out who I am and of discovering my true self'.<sup>1</sup> This insight I think is very deep – and it needs quite a bit of unpacking.

This is so particularly in our day, when the injunction to 'just be yourself' is everywhere – from dating websites, to career coaching, to lifestyle advertising. One critic has described this slogan as 'the [hollow] motto ... of late-capitalist Western individualism'.<sup>2</sup> He complains it promotes anxious self-consciousness about identity and often justifies uncritical indulgence of however we happen to feel or react. After all, that's just 'who I am'. It seems, then, an unlikely formula for growing into wisdom, compassion and maturity. So what is Merton getting at?

The critical notion, for him, is '*true self*'. 'The problem of sanctity', he says 'is the problem of ... discovering my true self'. But what ... who ... is that? Well, what it's not is our ego-ic identity – the bundle of psychic energy which is focused on securing our survival, place and meaning in the world. It's not that this ego-ic identity is bad –

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions Paperback, 2007), p.31.

<sup>2</sup> Jesse Browner, "'Just be yourself' is cruel, fraudulent advice to give to young people' (accessed: [http://www.salon.com/2015/06/15/just\\_be\\_yourself\\_is\\_cruel\\_fraudulent\\_advice\\_to\\_give\\_young\\_people/](http://www.salon.com/2015/06/15/just_be_yourself_is_cruel_fraudulent_advice_to_give_young_people/), 3 November 2016)

in fact, it's necessary for our becoming selves at all and for much of our functioning in the world. The problem is that it tends to ego-centricity. It imagines that we, I, am the centre of things – so much so that I don't even notice most of my self-protecting compulsions to dominate, organize and control the world on my terms. When any of us live without awareness of these compulsions, when we see only ever through the prism of our own perspective, we're unable to see other people and things clearly. We dwell in a kind of illusion, a falsity, and our way of being in the world tends to be threatened, driven – and at worst destructive.

The journey to spiritual maturity involves recognizing these patterns and learning to own the particular ways I am inclined to protect, justify and aggrandize myself. The more we *practice* this, the more our ego-ic self finds its rightful place. And the more this happens, the more we begin to discover who we are apart from this. This, for Merton, is my 'true' or at least my 'tru-er self'.

But here we come to a kind of paradox. Because the 'true self' isn't some 'entity' previously hidden and buried inside, some finished personality we can polish up and present to the world. That's ego-centricity again ... self-consciousness. No, discovering my true self more like discovering a new kind of responsiveness, a new capacity to pay attention to and to love the world, beyond anxious self-preoccupation. The notions of true self and 'no' self or 'selflessness' belong together.

So what does all this mean for us? Well – for one thing, I think, it helps to deepen our sense of what a saint is ... not some plaster piety, but someone undertaking the demanding journey from self-centredness to other-centredness, from illusion to reality. The saint, the true self, is characterized by receptivity to and availability for truth ... which means, ultimately, their availability for God. Merton said: 'If I find God I will find myself and if I find my true self I will find God'.<sup>3</sup>

This process is very different from the ego-centric cultivation of a lifestyle. You can't make a project of becoming a saint. And that's why this journey of sanctification and deepening authenticity is essentially a contemplative one. It's the

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<sup>3</sup> Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p.36.

fruit of our willingness be open to a reality beyond us. It involves patience, vulnerability and humility. Very early in his public ministry Jesus taught his disciples: 'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh'. This isn't about condoning unnecessary suffering, but recognizing that the true fulfillment of human life necessarily involves letting go clinging to life on our terms. It's in this place that we are at last in a position to receive and so capable of being for others as bearers of freedom, compassion and joy.

A Russian pilgrim we met on our last pilgrimage to Santiago said: it takes a long time to discover the verity of a life. As I celebrate my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday, I know that well! But this journey of deepening truthfulness is the journey of sanctification. All of us are called to become who we truly are, so that we may offer ever more freely and whole-heartedly what is distinctively ours to offer. Like pilgrims on any journey, we need the support of our fellow travelers – the inspiration of those who have gone before, and the companionship of those with whom we share our way. As we commit ourselves to this journey, we give thanks for all the saints living and dead, known and unknown, among whom, I think we can rightly hope, we may be numbered one day.