

28 November 2015

Brother (Matthew 13. 54-58)

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We come once more to the season of Advent – the time in the church’s year when we anticipate and prepare for the coming of God among us as we celebrate the birth of Jesus the Christ. Traditionally in this season, the lectionary readings focus on themes of wakefulness, repentance, judgement and receptivity. They exhort us to be ready and in a condition to receive this One who comes. This year at Benedictus I want to chart a bit of a different course through this time. I want to focus more directly on how we might understand and know this Jesus whose coming, whose birth we proclaim.

And this is for a very particular reason. The proclamation of Jesus as Messiah is not so easy for our contemporaries – maybe not so easy for some of us either – to hear. In my own journey of faith, Jesus and the meaning of Jesus has been the bit I’ve found most difficult. That he lived and died, and was a profound teacher of humanity seems easy enough to accept. But our tradition says more. It says he is the Saviour of the world, who has set us free from sin and healed us by his wounds. What does that mean? It says he’s the only begotten Son of God, the Word become flesh, God incarnate. What does that mean?

These are large, difficult and almost disorienting questions. But this Advent – I’d like us to dare explore them, to treat them as invitations to wake up to the magnitude and mystery of our faith, to turn again from half-heartedness and complacency, and so open ourselves to receive once more the radical and surprising newness of the gospel. In this way, my prayer is that we may indeed prepare ourselves to celebrate Christmas, wakefully, repentedly and vulnerably.

So how to go about this? In the past twenty or so years, theological engagement with the meaning of Jesus has been profoundly influenced by the work of a French-American scholar called Rene Girard. My own understanding of discipleship and the gospel has been enormously shaped by his insights, particularly as they have been mediated by the work of the English Catholic theologian James Alison. You'll have heard me quote from him many times. Not everyone agrees with their way of approaching theology. But for many, it's been an opening into transforming, authentic faith. Girard himself died about a month ago – aged 91. So in honour of Girard, and to share with you something of what I have found to bear abundant fruit in my journey, I'm proposing we explore our questions about Jesus in a Girardian key. The point of this is not to make Girardians of us all ... but to open our minds and hearts to the possibility of fresh vision and understanding.

Tonight we're going to start with the significance of Jesus being born as one of us, a fellow human being, our brother. The Christian testimony is that in Jesus, in this particular historical life, God became human, took on flesh and 'shared our common life'. It's important to remember that this is a testimony from the other side of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. The tales of Jesus' birth aren't newspaper reports written at the beginning of the story, but a rendering in story-form of what the first disciples had come to understand of his meaning. Given what they've experienced in relationship with him, given what's becoming possible among them because of him, they are testifying that somehow, in him, as him, God has dwelt among us. But what does that mean?

This is where one of Girard's key insights is profoundly helpful. So let me give a brief account of that – before coming back to our larger question. The insight is to do with the source and formation of the human self. Girard proposes that we human beings come to be selves, we develop our identities, through our relationship with what precedes us – the language and social world we're born into, the adults we depend on

as children, and so on. And we're related to these things by desire. Girard's insight is that we always desire according to the desire of another, we 'desire in imitation of somebody'. As Alison explains: 'For something to have value or interest for me, someone, another, has to have given it that value or interest'.¹ We see this from early childhood, where the infant is taught what to desire by adults – 'look at the pretty rattle, the teddy bear'. It continues in the playpen when the only toy from the several on offer that the toddler really wants to play with, is the toy the other toddler in the playpen is already playing with. This is what Shakespeare called 'borrowed desire' or 'desire by another's eye':² we desire in imitation of another. And that's how advertising works – we're shown what's desirable, and then we desire it.

This isn't a bad thing in itself. Imitation is how we learn language and culture, how human sociality is possible. Not only that – it's how we acquire a sense of self – an identity, an 'I'. I not only learn *what I want*, but I learn *who I am* according to the desires of another. I receive myself according to the regard of another. Now, when I am well parented, I receive a sense of myself as loveable and having a place. But the reverse can also happen. There are infants who receive no sense of being loveable, no sense of being someone and who can thus spend their adult years desperately trying to acquire a sense of sufficient selfhood. Most of us, says Alison, are somewhere 'on the scale between those whose sense of being, whose "I", was [peacefully and freely] loved into being ... and those who feel they have to grasp at a sense of being which always eludes them, manipulating and controlling others in their search. Certainly', Alison claims, 'no one is entirely without some sense of struggle, some violent acquisition of self'.³

¹ James Alison, *Raising Abel: The Recovery of the Eschatological Imagination* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996), p.18.

² Scott Cowdell, 'The "Darwin of the Human Sciences": Rene Girard, a Theological Retrospective (accessed 26 November 2015:

<http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2015/11/05/4346211.htm>)

³ Alison, *Raising Abel*, p.19.

And here is the problem. That we desire according to the desire of another means that we're often in rivalry with each other – for the toy in the playpen, for the same girl (or boy), to have the fastest car, the Vogue living house, the prestigious job. And fulfilling these desires is somehow connected to my sense of identity, making me feel like I really matter, I'm really here, loveable, like I've made it. So we are in competition with each other not just for things, but for being – seeking to secure our identity and value and place over against one another. Which is why this kind of rivalry can so readily escalate into violence – just ask Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers. Sibling rivalry (in the broadest sense) is built into the human condition. Alison speaks of our 'fratricidal fraternity'.⁴ There's something about the very way human identity is forged which works against our living peaceably and non-rivalrously, non-violently, together.

Which brings us back to Christmas. Because the testimony of our tradition is that into this fratricidal, threatened space of human culture comes Jesus as our brother.

In the next couple of weeks, we'll begin to look at how Jesus is said to liberate us from this way of being, opening up the possibility of true, non-fratricidal, fraternity as brothers and sisters in Christ. But for now, let me touch briefly on two implications of what I've already said.

First, if this is how human identity is necessarily and inevitably formed – our selves at some level acquired or grasped violently over against others, in relationship to parents and cultures themselves enmeshed in this same dynamic – then Jesus is remembered as being not like that. He *doesn't* have to grasp at being, he's in rivalry with no one, he is over against nothing at all. And it's in this light that he seems 'from elsewhere', his identity in no way shaded by human violence, but simply free, peaceable, lovingly creative of life as God is creative. This is a way of making sense, it

⁴ James Alison, *Faith Beyond Resentment: Fragments Catholic and Gay* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001), p.65ff.

seems to me, of what it might mean to speak of Jesus as the Son, the Word of God, made flesh.

And second, if God has come to us in Jesus as a brother, this begins to transform how we hear the word 'God' itself. So much of our image of God is in fact implicated in the fratricidal violence of human culture – God is 'our God', over against yours, licensing the persecution or murder; God is an overbearing paternalistic figure who is in some kind of rivalry with us and so out to punish, control or fix the limits of our belonging. But, says Alison, in Jesus God is with us at our level and not in rivalry with us. He's simply wanting to set us free, invite us in, make a place for us. In doing so, he draws us into authentically fraternal relationships with each other – we begin to see each other as Christ sees us. And through and with him, we begin to grow into maturity, to adulthood, sharers with him in the divine life. God ceases to be an abstract notion, a projection of our infantile father complexes, and is known in and through the transformation of our relation with each other.

This takes a lot of getting your head and heart around. It did for the people of Nazareth: "Where did this man get this wisdom and these deeds of power? Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us? Where did this man get all this?" And they took offense at him'. The suggestion that God looks like *this* – that God is with us at the human level, our brother, is no easier for us than for them. We can, like them, just disbelieve it – think it nonsense. Or – we might let it begin to open us to a new vision of God and so of one another. Let's see how we go this Advent season.