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Ground: Meister Eckhart (Luke 17: 20-21)

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There's a certain experience that feels characteristic of some key moments in my spiritual journey. The experience is of being *grounded*. I don't mean this so much in a 'I've found my centre' or 'my feet are on the ground' kind of way. It's more a sense of being laid flat out on the ground – in fact, 'flattened', prostrate, *pressed* to the ground captures it better. Defeat is another word I've used to describe this experience – but it's a 'good' defeat ... It feels as though it's connected to being more fully in contact with what's real, and so to a deepening truthfulness in me. It's like being emptied out of more of my illusions and pretensions to self-sufficiency. I'm always glad and in some sense relieved to be brought to ground in this kind of way ... even if the process of getting there has been painful and full of resistance on my part. For me, then, 'ground' has been a powerful metaphor for God and for my experience of God.

Perhaps that's why I've been drawn to the writing of Meister Eckhart, the 13th century theologian and teacher, for whom 'ground' was a 'master metaphor' of the spiritual life. In fact, according to one historian of Christian spirituality, Eckhart's use of the German word 'grunt' was a breakthrough to a new way of presenting a direct encounter with God.¹

Everyone who writes about Meister Eckhart says how difficult he is to summarise. He wasn't systematic and his language is ebullient, full of startling images and paradox. What I'm going to say tonight will be totally inadequate to the richness and complexity of his thought – but I'm hoping we can get a taste of him.

¹ Bernard McGinn, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart: The Man from whom God Hid Nothing* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001), p.38.

Johannes Eckhart (more commonly known as Meister [Master] Eckhart) was born in about 1260 in Eastern Germany. He entered the Dominican Order as a teenager,² and held some senior positions, including as Professor of Theology in Paris and Provincial of his order in Saxony. Most of his work survives in sermons, written in either Latin or German, and there are also collections of ‘counsels’, sayings and anecdotes. He was a popular and influential figure, though late in his life he faced charges of heresy on the grounds that he was dangerously inclined to confuse the distinction between creature and Creator, to make God internal to the human soul.³ He defended himself ‘fairly successfully’ against these charges, which seem to have been politically motivated,⁴ though ultimately – shortly after his death – some of his work was condemned by papal decree.⁵ He’s now been rehabilitated as belonging to the mainstream of Christian spirituality, though even now he’s considered on the ‘edgy’ side of things.

The key theme in his thought (and what was problematic for the authorities) was his insistence on the possibility of human beings coming into union with God, without distinction. Not just a union of will, but a union of essence.⁶ It’s not that he taught we *are* God; but (according to Eckhart) our soul in its essence has the potential to become one with God, and in that sense to ‘become’ identical with God.

In his Latin works, Eckhart uses a range of metaphors to describe the ‘innermost’ of the soul, the part of the self which is in the image of God. The soul is a ‘spark’ or ‘scintilla’ of the divine, a ‘castle’ and a ‘seed’ of God. In German, the word ‘grunt’ (ground) could be used of this same dimension of the self. But (unlike the Latin terms for the soul which could only be used to describe the depths of the human person) ‘grunt’ could also be used to indicate the hidden depths of God.⁷ So what’s important

² Meister Eckhart, *Selected Writings*, trans. Oliver Davies (London: Penguin, 1994), pp.xi-xiii.

³ Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to Saint John of the Cross*, second ed. (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1991), p.140.

⁴ Davies, *Selected Writings*, p.xvi.

⁵ Williams, *Wound of Knowledge*, pp.140-141.

⁶ McGinn, *Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart*, p.148.

⁷ McGinn, *Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart*, p.41.

for Eckhart about this metaphor is the way it allows him to speak of God and the soul in terms of identity. 'God's ground and my ground is the same ground', he said.⁸ Scholar Bernard McGinn writes: 'What emerges in Eckhart's mysticism of the ground is something new'.⁹ It speaks of 'total transformation into God'.¹⁰

How is this transformation wrought? And how does it affect ordinary life? In his preaching, Eckhart seeks to lead his hearers into awareness of God's presence in the ground of their soul by speaking of three essential processes: detaching, birthing and breaking-through.¹¹ The movement of 'detaching', as we saw last week with John of the Cross, is about ending 'possessiveness'. What we most need to be detached from is what Eckhart called our 'created' and we would call our 'ego-ic' self – our self-will and even self-knowledge insofar as we 'know' ourselves apart from God. This radical self-emptying is necessary because only as we are wholly emptied of self can we receive God.

As with John of the Cross, this process of detachment in intellect, will and desire is an expression of Jesus' teaching that 'anyone who would save their soul must lose it'. Eckhart says: 'We must learn to let ourselves go until we retain nothing at all that is ours ... We should put ourselves with all that is ours in a pure un-becoming of will and desire into the good and beloved will of God...'.¹² Ultimately we must be detached even from our desire to be good and to follow God, because from 'this' side of union with God, such desiring and willing keeps *us* in the way, not purely receptive to the God who is 'beyond all conceptions of "God"'.¹³ How do we this? Through naked and self-less attention to God – an attention which itself must always be further purified. Even our spiritual practices, though necessary, can become obstacles, if we relate to them as

⁸ McGinn, *Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart*, p.38.

⁹ McGinn, *Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart*, p.47.

¹⁰ McGinn, *Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart*, p.47.

¹¹ McGinn, *Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart*, p.133.

¹² McGinn, *Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart*, p.135.

¹³ McGinn, *Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart*, p.136.

ends in themselves. So Eckhart says: 'Go forth without a way', because 'whoever is seeking God by ways is finding ways and losing God, who in ways is hidden'.¹⁴ It's reminiscent of the Buddhist saying: 'my practice is no practice'.

As this process of 'detaching, letting go, relinquishing and unbecoming' happens, the soul enters a state which is like God in its 'perfect unity and simplicity'. ... It is, as Eckhart puts it, virginal'.¹⁵ It is thus ready to receive or conceive (the verb he uses can mean both) the eternal Word. This 'birth' of God in the soul follows necessarily from the soul's total self-emptying. All that remains of 'us' (as it were) is that part of the soul that is in the image of God. Once we are that ground, then God comes in 'without hesitation or delay'.¹⁶ McGinn writes: 'In this ground God *must* be God, and therefore must flood into what is grounded'.¹⁷ And with this birth of God in the soul, there comes our breakthrough to the hidden ground of our identity in God. One sermon says: 'just as he breaks through into me, so I break through into him. God leads this spirit into the desert and into the unity of himself, where he is simply one and welling up into himself'.¹⁸

This union of indistinction, never complete in this life, is not so much a particular kind of experience, as 'coming to realize and live out of the *ground* of experience ...'.¹⁹ Although it is beyond conceptual knowing, it has profound implications for our action. For Eckhart, the point of 'the life of grace is to find God in every experience and activity, to be "everywhere at home"'.²⁰ When we are truly connected to the source, the ground of being, then our action is increasingly not 'ours' but God's. Conversely, without this foundation in detachment from self and receptivity to God, even our so-called 'good works' are likely to be problematic. According to Rowan Williams, Eckhart stands in a long tradition 'which insists that the conversion of desire lies at the center of Christian

¹⁴ McGinn, *Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart*, p.115.

¹⁵ Williams, *Wound of Knowledge*, p.141.

¹⁶ Williams, *Wound of Knowledge*, p.141.

¹⁷ McGinn, *Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart*, p.138.

¹⁸ McGinn, *Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart*, p.143.

¹⁹ McGinn, *Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart*, p.149.

²⁰ Williams, *Wound of Knowledge*, p.144.

life and without it more activity is at best sterile and at worst destructive'.²¹ As Eckhart puts it, 'What we plant in the soil of contemplation, we shall reap in the harvest of action'.

This is a demanding way. Yet I find there's also deep hopefulness in it. We are *made* to come home to our ground in God, we are *made* for God. Thomas Merton was a 20th century mystic for whom the metaphor of ground was also important. Very near the end of his life, he said: 'In prayer we discover what we already have. You start where you are and you deepen what you already have, and you realize that you are already there. We already have everything, but we don't know it and we don't experience it. Everything has been given to us in Christ. All we need is to experience what we already possess.'²²

Eckhart says it too – in words that Richard has put into a song for us for the end of our service – 'The seed of God is in us. The seed of a pear tree grows into a pear tree, and a hazel seed grows into a hazel tree. A seed of God grows into God'.

²¹ Williams, *Wound of Knowledge*, p.146.

²² Quoted by Br. David Steindl-Rast, 'Recollections of Thomas Merton's Last Days in the West' [accessed <http://www.gratefulness.org/resource/recollections-of-thomas-mertons-last-days-in-the-west/>, 2 July 2016].