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On solidarity with the afflicted (Matthew 13: 24-30)

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In the last 4 weeks, Sarah has offered us a 'Mystic Winter' series, reflecting on a different Christian mystic each week. First was John of the Cross from 16th century Spain, who described the detachment required for the spiritual journey as a 'dark night', of the senses and of the soul. Next was Meister Eckhart, from 13th century Germany, who spoke of the spiritual journey as becoming more and more 'grounded' in God. Then we heard of the 14th century English mystic, Julian of Norwich, who considered our journey to God as a homecoming, whereby we are knitted into, made one with, God. The love which grows from this union Julian expressed as 'courtesy' towards others.

Finally, last week, Sarah spoke to us of the 20th century French philosopher and mystic, Simone Weil. Weil's main theme was 'attention', by which she meant a loving, non-grasping concentration of awareness and receptivity that takes one's attention away from oneself and on to others – other things, other people and God. Within that, Weil's greatest attention was to the afflicted, the least, those who are suffering.

If you missed any or all of these reflections on the mystics, you can find them on the Benedictus website under 'Reflections'. I commend them to you.

This week I would like to take up where we left off, with Simone Weil and her solidarity with the afflicted. I have always thought this was a good thing, especially in the light of Jesus' saying in Matthew 25 that as we show care for one of the least of these, we do so for Jesus.

I have more recently come to see that identifying with the victims of suffering and affliction is not an unambiguously good thing. It can lead to outrage about their suffering and from there to taking justice into our own hands, retribution and violence. Rather than being redemptive, it can create more victims. Let me explain where I am coming from.

Last week I attended a conference in Melbourne on Violence and Religion, which Nikolai and Sarah also attended and at which Sarah gave a response paper. By the way, that was very well received. People recognised her quiet wisdom and complete strangers continued to refer to Sarah's response in subsequent conversations.

While the focus of that conference was on contemporary Islamic terrorism, the speakers were careful to situate that within the broader picture of what makes for violence in religion generally. One speaker towards the end of the conference, a Christian theologian, pointed out that the best in all religions, with a focus especially on Christianity, Judaism and Islam, was their teaching and practice of solidarity with the least – the poor, the oppressed, the afflicted. He even quoted Simone Weil on this point. Such solidarity came from genuine love and compassion, which these religions identify with the heart of God.

What then came as a shock was that the worst in each of these religions, this speaker said, came from the same soil – solidarity with victims. He pointed out that all religious extremists and terrorist groups justify their actions precisely on the basis that they and their people are victims – of Western imperialism or other injustices and humiliations. The violence they commit is only a matter of justice, payback for the wrongs committed against them, according to their views. God is on their side, so they believe.

Solidarity with those who suffer is therefore quite ambiguous and does not necessarily lead to good outcomes. Let me give you some examples, from within Christianity. There was another paper given at this conference which showed a link between Christians identifying with Christ's suffering on the cross, and the Christian

persecution of the Jews, blaming them for killing Christ. While there is a terrible and complex history of Jewish persecution by the Christian Church and Christian nations, part of that has been driven by compassion for Christ's sufferings, and the misguided next step of looking for someone to blame.

Another example comes from protracted, bloody violence *between* church-going Christians, such as we have seen in Northern Ireland. Such violence is in part due to each side of the conflict being in solidarity with their *own* afflicted, the victims of violence on their own side. This fuels the outrage that leads to retribution that keeps the conflict going.

I will give one final example, this time closer to home. This situation was not overtly religious but was most likely fuelled by some religious sentiments, and illustrates my point well. A few weeks ago in Melbourne a small group of anti-Islamists staged a street demonstration to make their views known. At the same time, an anti-racist group staged a counter-demonstration nearby. The anti-racists, ostensibly standing for an open, tolerant and safe society, were so passionate about their cause that they chased some of the 'racists', as they called them, caught one man in a park, pushed him down and kicked him. So the police found themselves protecting the racists against the anti-racists, who were busy making their own victims of intolerance and violence.

So, solidarity with the afflicted is a problem. From the same soil grow the fruit of goodness, compassion and mercy, *and* that which bears intolerance, hatred and violence. It is a tangled mess - a bit like a field of wheat sown also with weeds. In this field can grow the seeds and the fruit of the kingdom of God, but they are seriously entangled by more sinister and dangerous growth which threatens to choke it. You cannot separate the one without destroying the other. They live together in the world and in each of us.

How then to respond? How are we to bear the fruit of the kingdom of God while entangled by other desires? Of course, much could be said here, but as I

reflected on this, I kept coming back to the difference grace makes. And that is because of the nature of grace as well as the fruit it bears.

The grace of God is the free gift to us of God's own love and life, known most clearly in Christ who was 'full of grace and truth' (John 1:14). Since God's love is offered to all – Jews and Gentiles – no-one is excluded. It is abundantly, outrageously, even offensively, generous and inclusive. To live by God's grace, according to the English theologian David Ford, is to 'live in a presence inexhaustibly creative, wise, good, merciful...'¹

David Ford goes on to say that the gospel of grace can be seen in concentrated form in the eucharist, the Lord's supper or the mass, as it is variously known. What happens in the eucharist, according to Ford, is: 'the blessing of Jesus as the blessing of God'.² He reminds us that at the Last Supper, on the night that he was betrayed, Jesus is forming community with those who would betray, deny and abandon him. Jesus does so, not only from his own loving-kindness and hospitality towards them. He is also creating the conditions for the possibility of community after the rupture in their relationships, where trust, forgiveness and hospitality may live again.³

Such generosity works from a different economy. Neither the disciples at the Last Supper, nor we, need be right and good to be invited into God's hospital life.⁴ There is nothing we can do to 'deserve' God's grace. It is freely given.

Living by grace is in contrast to grasping after our own identity and power in rivalry with others. Such grasping is evident in any act of violence or abuse. There, we would make a grab for power and control, take the law into our own hands, grasp weapons or victims, and shut our eyes to the suffering we are causing.

¹ David Ford, 'What Happens in the Eucharist?' *Scottish Journal of Theology* 45:3, 1995, p. 376.

² Ford, p. 377.

³ Ford, p. 373.

⁴ Ford, p. 373.

The economy of works is based on what people deserve. The economy of grace is based on receiving the gifts God offers, and sharing them with others. In the eucharist, we share God's astounding gifts, exchanging the greeting of peace, the bread of life and the cup of salvation. Ford reminds us that on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24: 13-35), Jesus is recognised by the two disciples only in the breaking of the bread, in his hospitality and his blessing, which he offers this time with pierced hands. The source of Jesus' life is way beyond all human notions of what people deserve and what Jesus may have felt in his affliction. Jesus continues to meet with us in peace and blessing.

Whenever I really get the grace of God towards us, get glimpses of its height and depth, its abundant generosity, I am both attracted to it and undone by it. I miss goodness in the world, and want to be part of God's good kingdom and see it flourish. But as the scriptures and mystics teach us, that requires a change of heart, dying to my old self and rising into Christ, being transformed over a lifetime, slowly being knitted into the life of God. Living by grace includes this longer term transformative work by the Spirit, letting grace do its work in us.

So what are we to make of the wheat and the weeds both growing from the soil of affliction? I would say, by all means be in solidarity with the afflicted. But in doing so, live by grace. Amen