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Teacher (Matthew 5. 43-48)

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‘In the gospels’, Laurence Freeman has pointed out, ‘Jesus is called *rabbi*, or teacher, more often than by any other title’.¹ A Christian is one who accepts Jesus as her teacher. But what is it, exactly, that we’re meant to be learning.

Tonight we come to the second week in our Advent series. Over this time, we’re exploring the meaning of Jesus, whose coming into the world we are preparing to celebrate with the feast of Christmas. And, as I said last week, during this series of reflections I want to draw particularly on an understanding of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection which emerges from the work of Rene Girard and James Alison. For many people, including me, their approach has been profoundly helpful in opening new perspectives on Jesus and so the meaning of Christian faith.

Last week we focused on one of Girard’s key insights, which is to do with the origins of human identity. Girard proposes that we human beings learn to be, we develop our selves essentially by imitation. As Alison writes: ‘We are massively competent imitating machines’. From earliest infancy we imitate the adults around us, and it is others ‘whom we imitate, who induct us into gestures, into language, into developing a memory, and thus having the beginning a sense of self over time’.²

This doesn’t mean we’re all exactly the same – carbon copies of one another. Each of us is an individual person – *this* body, with *this* life history over time, with *these* natural proclivities and gifts. But, as Alison says, the ‘I’ that I become is profoundly affected by my relationship with others – and that is so, whether I admire and emulate

¹ Laurence Freeman, *Jesus: The Teacher Within* (New York: Continuum, 2003), p.36.

² James Alison, ‘Discipleship and the shape of belonging’ in *Broken Hearts & New Creations: Intimations of a Great Reversal* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2010), pp.54-72, p.59.

some of my earliest influences, or whether I reject their model and determine never to be like them. I'm still formed by those relationships one way or another. So – again in Alison's words – 'None of us says "I am" in the absolute'.³ Our 'selves' are, if you like, products of negotiation between this body in its interactions with the social other over time.⁴

This means that we are constitutionally, existentially vulnerable to one another in very deep ways – for our sense of belonging, for recognition, for being 'OK'. And, in turn, this makes us prone to want to protect ourselves against being cast out or overlooked or judged inadequate. When I look back at my own life, I can see episodes strongly shaped by these dynamics. I saw others of my university cohort achieving, as I thought, so much more than me and felt – not a sense of celebration for them and the world, but a fairly toxic combination of envy, inadequacy, and judgment of them and me. 'They always were ambitious; I'm not into that kind of ladder-climbing anyway; ... actually, I'm failing'. Another time, I was treated badly by an employer: I wanted to hit right back, trash their reputation, bring them down as I had been brought down. And in various other relationships I can see myself responding with resentment when my expectations aren't fulfilled, or positioning myself to be well-thought of, loved, respected. Maybe some of this resonates for you too!

It's as if we experience a deep need to secure ourselves and, in a world that often occurs as wounding or threatening, we can find ourselves competing with one another in all kinds of ways for space or status, or manoeuvring one another into giving us the reassurance we seek. It's not always like this of course. A parent delightedly celebrates a child just for being themselves; a lover lets the beloved be; a friend forgives a disappointment without hidden conditions. But it takes something for us to shift from what Alison calls a pattern of life based primarily on reciprocity – you scratch my back

³ Alison, 'Discipleship and the shape of belonging', p.62.

⁴ Alison, 'Discipleship and the shape of belonging', p.60.

and I'll scratch yours, you don't scratch my back and watch out – to a pattern of life which is gratuitous, non-rivalrous, grace-full – and so genuinely life-giving for us and for those around us.

And this is what Jesus is teaching us – how to make that shift; how (in the context of our vulnerability) to be and be towards each other as God is – gratuitously, freely, as gift – rather than competitively, conditionally, demanding a return.

Time and again, in the gospels, Jesus instructs us not to fall into rivalry or destructive reciprocity. 'Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven' (Matthew 6.1). 'Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get' (Matthew 7. 1-2). Even friendly reciprocity is dangerous, because it keeps us hooked into securing our identities from one another. 'When you give a dinner or a banquet do not invite your friends or your brothers or your kinsmen or rich neighbours, lest they also invite you in return, and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. You will be repaid at the resurrection of the just' (Luke 14. 12-14).

It's important to hear these not primarily as moral commands – do these, and you'll be judged a good person; do these – and you'll get a reward from God, an even better one than you can get from people. It's more – give up competing with each other, or looking to each other to secure yourselves. As Jesus says in John's gospel: 'I do not accept glory [that is my reputation, my value] from human beings ... How can you believe [in me] when you accept glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the one who alone is God?' (John 5. 41, 44). In other words, be free of these kinds of ties ... fix your attention elsewhere, receive yourself from God, who freely gives life to all and sends the rain on the just and the unjust alike.

As we grow in this way, it becomes possible even to be treated badly and not have what we do next be determined by that. ‘You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”. But I say to you, Do not resist an evil doer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also ...’ (Matthew 5. 38-39). ‘You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy”. But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven’ (Matthew 5. 43-45).

Again – this doesn’t mean we’re called to be doormats, letting bullies walk all over us and abusers get away with it. What Jesus is interested in is our freedom, our capacity to *act* rather than just *react*. ‘Jesus is making a point about a pattern of desire which’, says Alison, ‘is not in any way at all run by what the other is doing to it; which is not in reaction in any way at all, but is purely creative, dynamic, outward going, and able to bring things into being and flourishing’.⁵ Sometimes, we might indeed bring an evil-doer to court – but we’ll do that from a radically different place. And this is the space of forgiveness – think of Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu – the space of reconciliation and renewed community.

So how do we learn this way of being, this freedom? How do we shift from a pattern of life stuck in reciprocity to one sourced in gratuity? That’s what being disciples, students of Jesus is about. It’s about gradually detaching from certain ways of securing our identities. Contemplative prayer is about this – we’re detaching from the self-sufficient self and all the patterns of thought that run us, entrusting our selves to God. The Eucharist is about this – at this table we are divested of any identity except that of forgiven ones, sharers together in the life of God, given for all – merited by none. More and more, discipleship draws us to participate in Jesus’ own journey and so be changed into his likeness. It’s not an easy way ... it involves a certain kind of death, and a consent to the very vulnerability we most seek to avoid. But in the end, our teacher

⁵ James Alison, ‘Love your Enemy: within a divided self’, in *Broken Hearts & New Creations*, pp.160-175, p.166.

Jesus is inducting us into a new way of being human, children of the God who is in rivalry with nothing at all, 'perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect'.