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Stewards of God's Grace (1 Peter 4. 1-11)

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If you read 1 Peter, what's striking is the number of exhortations to behave in certain ways. We've just heard a rather formidable set of do's and don'ts. The don'ts come first. You've already spent enough time, says the text, 'in doing what the Gentiles like to do; living in licentiousness, passions, drunkenness, revels, carousing and lawless idolatry' – so no more of that, thanks very much. It sounds rather puritanical and prudish. But, writing of the cultural milieu of the first century Greco-Roman world, classical scholar Sarah Ruden has noted that what's being forbidden here is not just a 'good time'. The words translated as 'revels and carousing' refer to something more like orgies and 'after-parties' in which groups of drunken men raged the streets at night, looking for sex, behaving violently, disrupting the neighbourhood.¹ They refer to patterns of behaviour that are inherently exploitative and inimical to common life.

By contrast, writes Peter, you Christians are to 'be serious and discipline yourselves for the sake of your prayers. Above all, maintain constant love for one another'. And the same kinds of commendation pepper the whole text. 'Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart' (1.22); 'have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind' (3.8); 'I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is in your care, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it – not for sordid gain but eagerly. Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock ... And all of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with

¹ Sarah Ruden, *Paul Among the People: The Apostle Reinterpreted and Reimagined in His Own Time* (New York: Image Books, 2010), pp.32-33.

one another' (5.2-5). Now, there's something about this style of admonition, that isn't immediately appealing to the modern reader. I certainly find myself tending to glaze over a bit. But if you focus a little more carefully, I wonder what you notice about them?

In the past few weeks, we have been exploring the 'shape of Christian virtue' or goodness. I've been seeking to characterize what might be distinctive about this – not in a spirit of rivalry with other traditions, but so we might be clearer about the nature of the life in which we are being formed. Last week, we explored what our tradition calls the 'theological virtues' – the virtues of faith, hope and love. These are the fundamental dispositions that grow in us as we deepen our receptivity to God's Spirit. I emphasised that these virtues reflect the being of God and make us like God. Tonight, as we consider the moral exhortations in the New Testament letters, we see the same underlying conception in play. On the Christian vision, what counts as virtue must be defined with reference to who God is and what God is bringing about. And what is that?

Well, the New Testament proclamation is that in Christ, God has come among human beings to liberate us from all that binds and diminishes us, and to enable a new kind of human solidarity or communion. The character of this new solidarity was evident in Jesus' ministry. He established a community which included those considered outliers in terms of their belonging to Israel, and which encompassed relationships with the outcast and unclean. In his resurrection, he empowered his followers to extend this community 'to the ends of the earth'. This was not a bid for tyrannical rule, but an invitation to all – Jew and Gentile, slave and free, men and women – to find a new belonging to God and so to one another by means of his radical hospitality. Rowan Williams speaks of Jesus 'remaking the frontiers of human belonging'.²

Two things are worth bringing out in this regard. One is that the community that comes into being through Christ's universal welcome is not determined by pre-

² Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), p.231.

existing social limits. Its members have no need to secure their value over against each other, or over against other communities, since in this new community, belonging and significance is the gift of God. The effect of this, then, is radically to subvert the ethic of the Greco-Roman world in which human meaning, value and virtue are ascribed according to one's honour in the eyes of 'men'. In this culture, the 'good life' was connected to a certain kind of appearance in the public realm, and virtue is what enables you to carve out 'an impressive *presence* before others'.³ For the philosopher Aristotle, for example, the crown of the virtues was magnanimity – an aristocratic disposition expressed in the willingness to confer benefits on others, but never to be yourself in the position of indebtedness or need. In the Greco-Roman world, humility could never be considered a virtue, because here 'the possession of virtue [is] fundamentally related to the accumulation of honour'.⁴

How strange, then, in this world to proclaim a Saviour who has humbled himself so that all may be members of the one body, and the distinction between first and last effaced! But if this is what Christ is doing among us, then Christian virtue must be defined with reference to him. Which brings us back to the exhortations from 1 Peter with which we began. Love, hospitality, humility, generosity, sympathy. These are ways of being oriented towards a particular form of common life. Williams says that 'the relations of Christians to each other is one of building up; we are engaged, in Christ, in *constructing* each other's humanity, bringing one another into the inheritance of power and liberty whose form is defined by Jesus'.⁵

And it's significant to think how this affects not only what counts as virtue, but the particular quality of the virtues commended. For example, a hospitality that is oriented towards mutual building up, that comes out of a sense of sharing in gift, has a quite different feel from the hospitality that is offered either out of duty or, by

³ Jane Foulcher, *Reclaiming Humility: Four Studies in the Monastic Tradition* (Collegeville, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2015), p.15.

⁴ Foulcher, *Reclaiming Humility*, p.15.

⁵ Williams, *On Christian Theology*, p.232.

Aristotle's magnanimous man, out of condescension: 'be hospitable to one another without complaining', says 1 Peter. Be towards one another as God has been towards you; graciously, freely, unbegrudgingly.

Humility and mutual love are likewise sourced in the understanding that each member of the community is invited to be there and welcomed by God, and that each of us is accountable to God for the way we are towards one another. There is no room here to compete for status, value or control. And this background sense of shared belonging and grace affects the exercise of all the virtues. Take the virtue of justice, for example, which is transformed when it's understood in the light of the commitment to share in Christ's building up of humanity.

Imagine someone emerging from an encounter at Centrelink. They might say: 'I wasn't denied any of my rights. The person who served me did everything by the book and I got all I was entitled to. But I feel humiliated by how I was treated'.⁶ Justice, at least of a sort, has been served – the rules followed, the legislated entitlements delivered. But something deeply and humanly necessary has been denied. And that denial is experienced as diminishing, even violating.

If you think of Jesus in the gospels, there's a very different spirit at work. He doesn't just do the minimum to get someone back on their feet or back to work, while at some level condescending to them, making them feel small or at fault. Quite the contrary. His way of being with others involved strengthening the wholeness in each person – often releasing them from bondage or limitation at many levels. In the Christian vision, it is only justice of this kind that actually does justice to the other.

So the virtues commended by the New Testament letters are, on the one hand, ways of being that reflect and participate in God's way of being towards us. Persons and communities practising these virtues witness to the shape and power of God in human life, which is the power to recreate, to liberate, to enable one

⁶ See Christopher Cordner, 'Two Conceptions of Love in Philosophical Thought', *Sophia* 50 (2011), pp.315-329, p.325.

another's fuller being and truth. This is what it means to say that living in accord with these virtues 'glorifies' God.

And they are ways of being that constitute a Christian community as a distinctive kind of sociality. There is a necessarily communal dimension to both the practice and the outworking of virtue on Christian understanding. Our growth in virtue (as persons and communities) is proved by the quality of our relationship with one another, and with the wider world. And this is why 1 Peter encourages us: 'above all maintain constant love for one another ... Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received ... so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ'. Amen.