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The Virtue of Obedience (1 Peter 2.9-17)

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Our theme in these weeks concerns ‘holy living’ or the ‘shape of Christian virtue’. We’re exploring what, in the wake of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the first Christians understood as the shape of the good life. But this week we run aground what seems an unfortunate feature of so many of the New Testament letters when they treat of this theme. It’s that they seem overly conforming to the social mores of their time, and distinctly overly enamoured of the virtue of obedience.

Obedience to God – we get. In tonight’s text, readers are reminded of the magnitude of their calling. 1 Peter is addressed to those who have been ‘chosen and destined by God’ (1.1), and draws on imagery from the Hebrew bible to insist that ‘you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light’ (2.9). If this is the new identity, the vocation they’re living into, little wonder they’re called to be no longer driven by pre-occupation with their social standing or worldly care: ‘Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul’. (2.11).

But all too quickly, to our ears, this calling to be true to their new vocation and obedient to God seems to devolve into exhortations to obey or submit to problematic features of the lives they’re already in. Recipients of 1 Peter are members of Christian communities facing hostility if not persecution. They are told to accept the suffering that befalls them, in imitation of Christ. Even more problematically, from our point of view, a quite radical obedience to the social structures in which they are enmeshed is commanded. ‘For the Lord’s sake, accept the authority of every human institution’ (2.13); slaves ‘accept the authority of your

masters' (2.18); 'wives, in the same way, accept the authority of your husbands' (3.1). So problematic has this final exhortation become that it's simply omitted from the lectionary for public reading! Is this text really saying that meekly submitting to whatever suffering befalls us, accepting the authority of every human institution – including unjust structures such as slavery and patriarchal marriage – that this is part of holiness of life?

Well, somewhat in fear and trembling, I want to have a go at what might be important for us to hear in this. But first let me lay my cards on the table. I take it for granted that slavery is contrary to God's will for humanity; I take it likewise for granted that there are times when human institutions (emperors, governors, presidents, corporations and even laws) should not be obeyed, and that a good marriage is one where each partner is equally honoured and allowed authorship (under God) of their own life. So why doesn't 1 Peter say so?

Well, context is everything. Scholars suggest that this text (and others like it in the New Testament canon) subverts some of the social norms of its time more significantly than we might realise. In particular, its assumption that the central relationship in Christian life is to God, allows for a quite different perspective on relationships with the social other. Take the instruction to accept the authority of the emperor (2.13), for example. Scholar Graeme Stanton notes that at the time this letter was written, 'non-Christians in the area recognized the Roman emperor as a deity', but Peter explicitly identifies him as representing a 'human institution'. The text reads: 'As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. Honour everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honour the emperor' (2.17-17). 'In this way', Stanton remarks, 'the "divine" emperor is, as it were, being cut down to size; his [human] authority is to be respected, but there are limits to the honours he is to be accorded by Christians'.

In a similar way, slaves and wives are members of the Christian family who just do (in this society) occupy socially subordinate positions. They too are instructed to inhabit their stations in life respectfully and yet differently. Their honour for the

human institutions to which they belong is to flow out of their primary relationship to God rather than being simply determined by those who have immediate power over them. 'Slaves, accept the authority of your masters ... not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh. For it is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly'. For remember that Christ also suffered unjustly, and entrusted himself to the one who judges justly (2.18-23). And the letter goes on: 'Wives, in the same way, accept the authority of your husbands, so that, even if some of them do not obey the word, they may be won over without a word by their wives' conduct, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives' (3.1-2).

Now we know that this kind of exhortation to uncomplaining obedience has been put over the centuries to terrible use. But, notice, in a context where the divinity of the emperor, and the power of slave owners and husbands was considered absolute, how profound a wedge this way of thinking introduces. We would like the New Testament simply to have denounced slavery and patriarchy. 'What was the matter with the early Christians?' Rowan Williams has asked. 'Could they not see that slavery was wrong?' Well, he goes on: 'The short answer is that probably they couldn't in any nice clear modern sense. They were as conditioned to see slavery as normal as we would be conditioned ... to see our ordinary patterns of social and financial life as normal'.¹ But to introduce the idea that slaves and women had a relationship with God that was prior to and undetermined by their relationship with their owners and husbands, to think that they might have a choice about how to be towards their situation, well, that introduces something distinctive and new. Ultimately, it was transformative.

I know this doesn't resolve all the issues. The appeal to 'inward freedom' while being outwardly oppressed only takes you so far; particularly since the church itself has for so long abused these texts, and since we now understand the extent to which outward oppression tends to colonise you inwardly. A slave can be made to

¹ Rowan Williams, *Meeting God in Paul* (London: SPCK, 2015), p.40.

believe himself sub-human, a woman to believe she matters less than a man. And the same destructive 'colonisation' of self is true also for gay or non-binary people in a heterosexist and binary culture, for non-white people in a white racist culture, and so on. Where this is so, the sense in which there is there any real possibility of freely accepting the social dynamic in question is clearly limited.

So where does this leave us? If we can no longer take seriously some of the specifics of these exhortations to obedience, is there anything for us in such a text? Well, I sense there is something – though it needs careful unpacking. But it's to do with the quality of our relationship with the givenness of our lives and our social context, and how this affects the way we live as God's people here and now.

As a way of getting at this, I invite you to bring to mind the givenness of your life. Maybe some of your more difficult relationships or personal circumstances; maybe injustices you know you are bound up in – whether as the beneficiary of an unjust system, or as a victim. Think about the aspects of your life, of our culture and society that we cannot change easily or simply by willing them to be different. What would it mean to 'accept' the 'authority' of these as given? To let them be? To look to obey God in and through what currently is?

What I'm beginning to sense is that the New Testament emphasis on obedience reflects the insight that true, wise and reconciling engagement with the world cannot be rooted, first and foremost, in resistance to the world as we find it. If I want a difficult relationship or circumstance to be transformed, for example, I know it doesn't work to begin by resisting it, fighting it. Somehow, I have to accept that it is as it is – I have to try (at least) to accept what I find difficult, to embrace the whole dynamic, its suffering and intractability as well as my desire it be otherwise. This doesn't mean resigning myself to live in a dysfunctional or oppressive circumstance forever. But if I can't be with things as they are, if I am unwilling to embrace and undergo the suffering of what's unreconciled, then I'm actually refusing, negating the possibility of its transformation. Why is that? Well, there's something about the way God works that is from the 'within' of things. And here, it maybe helps to think of the

model of Christ's radical embrace and undergoing of the givenness of the world as intrinsic to the work of redemption. The practice of obedience invites us to the inside of our own and of the world's pain, rather than trying to fix it from the outside – no matter how well-intentioned our efforts. It's the inner act that joins us then beyond self-will with God's continuous action to reconcile and re-create.

Rowan Williams describes Jesus' obedience as 'active and transfiguring acceptance of the world's limit'. This 'active acceptance' is quite different from mere acquiescence or despairing resignation to the status quo. The paradox of Christian obedience is that by freely consenting to be subject to what we would not choose, in a spirit of openness to God, then what is created is space for grace to enter, for God to act.

Obedience, in our cultural moment, is an unpopular virtue – it's clearly susceptible of corruption. But if we're called to 'holy living', perhaps we need to discern its meaning anew in our day. Simone Weil thought it was the supreme virtue. And she wrote: 'Every creature which attains perfect obedience constitutes a special, unique, irreplaceable form of the presence, knowledge and operation of God in the world'.