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'The Aim of His Art' (Matt 5:38-48)

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The fourth century theologian, Gregory of Nyssa, had an image of the Christian life which I like, and which came to me as I reflected on tonight's reading. He was considering what it meant for us to be made in the image of God, and since our calling is to live according to this image, then it relates to human, and the Christian, life.

Like other early church theologians, Gregory had a number of metaphors for being in the image of God. A common one then was a stamp or impress: we are all stamped with God and thus belong to God. The story of the coin of Caesar in Matt 22 was used to illustrate this. Jesus was asked if the Jews should pay taxes to Rome. He held up a coin and asked, 'Whose likeness (icon) is on this coin?' When they answered 'Caesar's', Jesus said: 'Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's' (Matt 22:21). By implication, Gregory argued, you are stamped with God, render therefore yourself to God.

The image of the stamp or coin is significant as it means all people, regardless of race, gender, age or ability, are stamped with God and are deserving of respect. Although a rather static image, it does contain within it a dynamic movement over a lifetime of rendering our lives to God. But this is not the one that came to me.

A second common illustration for the early church was of the image as in a mirror. They argued that we mirror God, though not unambiguously. We sometimes mirror the devil, or other animals, such as dogs, swine and vipers. But if we are to reflect God, we need not only to clean our mirror, a reference to Christian baptism, but to turn it to face God. A mirror can only reflect the sun if it is turned to face the sun, so we too, if we are to reflect God in the world, must turn our lives towards God. This, too, is a good illustration of living as an image of God, and does involve a

certain dynamism over time as we turn our lives around to face God, but then is somewhat static. And this is not the one I thought of, either.

The image that came to me this week is more dynamic, and thus more about our transformation over a lifetime than the others. Gregory used the metaphor of a *sculptor* in a marketplace creating a form from a block of stone. As people walk past over the weeks and months, they begin to see the beauty of the form emerge from the stone. The sculptor, by 'chipping away at superfluous parts', brings the form to light. He says, the process is 'not by the change of the material into the figure, but by the figure being wrought upon the material.' In other words, we are not changed into somebody or something that we are not, rather, what is not God-like is chipped away. Gregory concludes that, as the sculptor works on the stone, 'even an unskilled observer may, by what he sees, conjecture the aim of his art'.¹

I like this metaphor because our whole lives remain in process. There is no finished product. What is important is that we are on the way, such that others looking at us can at least, over time, see where we are headed. And it seems to have forgiveness built into it, for all the times we fall short and fail, so long as the end is kept in sight and we progress overall.

Further, the process is very much that of God working in (or should I say, on) us, although we must cooperate with this work if it is to have any effect. The 'chipping away' comes about because of what we are willing to let go of, renounce, in order to become a new creation. Such a new creation may refer to an individual or to a community, as it does in the New Testament. As Gregory understood it, what is 'new' is the recovery of an original image that was hidden or covered (never actually lost), as well as a forward movement of becoming more and more Christ-like. And that changes us, not into something we are not, but into who we really are. It is very much about the journey of transformation.

Why, then, did this metaphor of the sculptor come to me in response to the reading for tonight? I think there are three reasons for this.

¹ Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, XXX. 30.

First, the Sermon on the Mount, and this reading in particular, are about being called into a new way of being. This will never work merely as an act of will on our part, but requires a healing of the heart and a movement away from sourcing our lives from the things of this world, to sourcing our lives from God's life. It is that which makes a difference to the way we live in the world.

To engage in the very common, human desire for retaliation – an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth – is to react to a situation from within it, to satisfy a desire that arises from it. But if our lives are lived from God's life, we have a source of life entirely free of the resentments, recriminations and fears in which we find ourselves enmeshed. That enables us to act with generosity rather than retaliation, sourced from God's abundant life. To respond in this way requires a life-long process of being sculptured into a likeness of God. What is 'chipped away' are our resentments and fears, our anxieties and self-righteousness. Then we are more able to have compassion on others, even those who hurt us, as we are all caught in the same mess. Though the metaphor of the sculptor may convey a certain pain in the process, it is also liberating as our true form emerges from being encased in the stone. Put another way, our hearts of stone are made into hearts of flesh.

The second reason why I turned to Gregory of Nyssa's sculptor was for his concluding remark: that those walking by may 'conjecture the aim of his art'. In talking of the Christian life we often speak in terms of transformation, but what is this about? What is its aim?

If the process of transformation, or sanctification, is about being formed more and more into the image of God, and allowing God to work this work in us from the inside, then its aim must be congruent with the mission of God. Overall, we can say that God's mission is the salvation of the world, the reconciliation of all things into a reign of peace. Justice, then, is not an end in itself, as if its meaning derives from a situations of wrong-doing and how to deal with them. Rather, the meaning of justice derives from the overall aim of reconciliation. It is about righting wrongs in such a way that there may be healing, confession and forgiveness, opportunities for wrong-

doers to mend their ways, and a subversion of the usual cycle of violence and counter-violence. When Jesus tells us to give our cloak as well as our coat, to walk the extra mile, to love our enemies, he is urging us to act from this larger and more generous form of justice that serves reconciliation. That is the aim of his art.

Third, I find that Gregory's sculptor enables us better to understand the last line of tonight's reading: 'Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect'. At face value, this seems too much, an unfair demand in response to which we are bound to fail. It helps to know that in Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says at this point, 'Be merciful, as your heavenly Father is merciful' (Luke 6:36). Other translations use 'compassionate' instead of 'merciful'. We will still fail to reach God's standard, but at least the call is not perfection. I prefer Gregory's sculptor in which forgiveness is built into the process, and it is the overall aim that matters.

Nevertheless, we are left with the word 'perfect' in Matthew's gospel. What are we to make of this? I think it helps to be clear about what 'perfect' does *not* mean here. There is a view of God in Greek philosophy that upholds God's perfection and, by implication, God cannot be made imperfect by being too involved in this world. Matter must not contaminate spirit. There is also a view in the Old Testament of God's perfect holiness requiring God, and God's people, to remain untainted and pure. Hence the purity codes. But within the prophetic tradition in which Jesus aligned himself, God is very much involved in this world, loving and saving it. Importantly, the Christian doctrine of incarnation has Jesus born into our world, as St Augustine points out, the same way as the rest of us: between faeces and urine. He got his feet and hands dirty in his life and ministry to others. He was the true icon of God, who left the holy space to meet and save us, breaking down divisions between God and us, and between ourselves. So being 'perfect' cannot mean spotless and untainted. The word 'perfect' *can* mean complete and whole. And God's perfect love casts out fear (1 John 4:18).

Perhaps Jesus' injunction to be perfect has to do with the kind of love that comes from wholeness and abundance, not fear, that breaks down barriers and

divisions, and is in the service of reconciliation. As I suggested before, this is the aim of the sculptor's art – a high calling, but one in which we are liberated and formed into our authentic selves.