

Self-Concern, Self-Forgetting (Mark 8. 31-38)

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When my brother Michael had finished school, he travelled overseas with three friends on the customary 'gap year' backpacker adventure. They went to the US, the UK and continental Europe and when they got to Germany, Michael (equipped with his school-boy German) was their designated translator. One day, they were at a station preparing to board their train, when a man further down the platform shouted at them agitatedly. Michael didn't catch what he said – and so asked, in German, if he could speak more slowly. The man, coming towards them, spoke again – again too fast, and again my brother requested he slow down. Then, coming right up to Michael and speaking excruciatingly slow German, he said 'I wasn't talking to you'.

Last week, we began our Lenten exploration of what it means to repent, to 'change our minds' (*metanoia*). I introduced 4th century theologian, Evagrius Ponticus, who taught that the roots of illusion and 'sin' in us are sourced, more often than not, in our 'thoughts' (*'logismoi'*) – obsessive habits of mind that water seeds of destructive 'passion'. Evagrius identified eight major categories of these thoughts – gluttony, greed, sloth, sorrow, lust, anger, vainglory and pride. I invited you begin to wonder about *your* characteristic patterns of thought, your recurring internal worries, dramas, complaints, wants. Did you start to notice any? Did you notice how they affected you – how they determined what you paid attention to, what you felt when you were possessed by them, how you behaved?

Well, today we continue our exploration – focusing on the thought that Evagrius said was at the source of all our obsessive self-talk and fantasy. ‘The first thought of all is that of love of self; after this, the eight’.

Now this leads immediately into tricky territory, particularly in the light of our contemporary concern for self-fulfilment, self-esteem, self-care. And so does our gospel reading: ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it’.

Let’s consider for a moment where Evagrius is coming from. What do the eight thoughts revolve around? Me. Me wanting to secure my place in the world – vainglory, pride, anger; me wanting to seize or consume more of the world’s goods – lust, gluttony; me wanting to be left undisturbed or allowed to wallow in dissatisfaction – sloth, sorrow. The eight thoughts are self-protecting, self-promoting, self-indulging habits of mind that keep me firmly at the centre of my concern. As a consequence they tend to blind me to the reality and needs of other people. *And* they generate the illusion of separation from a larger giving life, the life of God. They suggest to me that the necessities and goods of life – food, sex, the regard of others and so on – need to be grasped at and possessed. They arise from a basic lack of trust in the provision and generosity of God.

And this grasping, this lack of trust seems to be what Jesus sees in Peter too. Jesus has begun to share with his disciples the fullness of his vocation. He knows that, of necessity, the radical freedom, hospitality and love of God will conflict with the self-preserving instincts of the rulers of his day. He will be rejected by the elders, chief priests and scribes ... killed ... and yet – he trusts that somehow all this will happen *inside* the life of God – after three days, he says, he will rise again. Peter can’t believe it. He takes Jesus aside and ‘began to rebuke him’. Which leads Jesus to rebuke Peter – sharply: ‘Get behind me, Satan!’ (one who tempts). ‘For you are setting your mind [those thoughts again] not on divine things but on human things’.

Jesus shares in and lives responsive to God's abundance and mercy, trusting it as the ultimate reality despite the world's violence and even in the face of death. Peter wants him instead to be 'sensible', to preserve himself from danger as if that were the way to more life. But that, Jesus knows, is the great illusion. The paradoxical truth is that if you want really to live, you must receive your life as gift and not grasped; if you want to be connected to the source of all life, you cannot isolate yourself by way of self-protection or self-promotion. You must be prepared to let go your separate self, your self-concern, and entrust yourself to a larger reality. 'Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake ... will save it'.

But what about this troublesome instruction, 'let them deny themselves'? Or Evagrius' suspicion of 'self-love'? We know how damaging these exhortations have so often been in Christian culture – people in abusive marriages or gay people required to deny the truth of their experience; many of us trained to be automatically suspicious of our desires, as if they didn't really matter and were probably selfish; people burning themselves out on worthy causes unable to make space for their own needs. Is all this self-denial really the way to life?

In the end, I believe we need to employ two notions of 'self' to make sense of Jesus' teaching here. Thomas Merton spoke of 'true' and 'false' self; Carl Jung spoke of 'ego' and 'Self' with a capital 'S'. And these two selves are implicit in Jesus' paradoxical words: there is a life, a self that needs to be lost (the false, egotistical, separate, grasping self); but those who lose this life for my sake *will find* their life – so there is a self to be discovered, returned to us (the true self, the person I am and am called to become in God). Discovering, becoming our true self can be a lifetime's journey – but the ultimate distortion, sin, is to live as if the 'false' self is at the centre, the point of it all. Love of, attachment to this self – that's what blocks life.

How do we discern and loose the hold of the 'false' self and all the self-protecting, self-promoting, self-obsessed thoughts that prop it up? Sometimes, we

do just need to be woken up, challenged to stop indulging fantasy, to 'deny' our false self. 'Get behind me, Satan!' Don't give any airtime to your illusions, get real.

But here's the danger. The false self is resilient and adaptive. The language of denial may be and often is adopted by the false self, woven into an ever-subtler fabric of self-concern, my religious ego (for example) taking enormous pride in my self-denial. Thomas Merton writes perceptively of the virtuous man who 'burns with self-admiration': "The relish he savours in acts that make him admirable in his own eyes, drives him to fast, or to pray ... or to build churches and hospitals, or to start a thousand organizations ... Once he has started on this path there is no limit to the evil his self-satisfaction may drive him to do in the name of God".¹

So as well as some necessary denial of the false self, I reckon there are two further ways of exposing her. The first is humour – suddenly glimpsing your seriousness about yourself and its strivings (even your strivings to 'deny' yourself, to be good), seeing in a moment of delicious self-awareness, how ridiculous you are being. 'I wasn't talking to you'. There is a whole world out there that is not about you – and what a relief that is! You can relax and learn to be part of it – without being at the centre of it.

The second (paradoxically) is self-compassion. Sometimes I know I'm being ridiculous, or obsessive, stuck in destructive patterns – but I can't help it. I can't just stop, or deny them. OK – you've acknowledged it and maybe now you can be gentle. You're a fragile creature, held in the love of God. You're not perfect. You don't have to be. Be tender with yourself – which is not the same thing as indulging the pattern. Just accept your powerlessness in the face of it. Remarkably, I find, gentleness with our creatureliness – which is a practice of humility – leads us back to the world more self-forgetfully, and with real compassion for others. It opens the channel of grace.

¹ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: A New Directions Book, 2007), 50.

Last week, you might have got in touch with some of your patterns, your obsessive self-concern, your self-referencing thoughts – and how they function to justify you, or preserve and promote you. Can you deny yourself those pleasures of the ‘ego’ flat out – simply put them behind you, refuse to entertain them? Or can you laugh at yourself, recognise the thoughts as absurd, ridiculous since (*I’ll break it gently*) you are not the centre of the world? Or do you need to be tender with yourself, since the thoughts arise, perhaps, out of deep pain or unmet longing, and are to be honoured and received with compassion, even if not compulsively indulged? This week, I invite you to explore how you might be with your thoughts and your self, and to wonder how God is calling you to fuller life this Lent.