

Not One Stone Left (Mark 13: 1-2)*Pentecost XXVI*

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‘Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down’. When the writer of Mark’s gospel scribed these words, it’s likely that the great temple in Jerusalem had already been destroyed by the Romans. And if that’s so, then the casualness, the indifference of the words attributed to Jesus in this text are truly remarkable. Because the destruction of the temple was a catastrophic event. It was the culmination of the brutal suppression of the Jewish rebellion against the Roman empire and it flattened the central feature of Jewish religious life. Yet Jesus makes almost nothing of it.

Of course, thinking about this a bit more, it’s actually not so surprising. The indifference attributed to Jesus about the temple’s fate is consistent with his relationship to it throughout his life. Though it must have dominated the Jerusalem of his day – given its size and economic importance, its structuring of social and religious life – Jesus hardly engages with the temple at all. He did once symbolically cleanse it, and on a few occasions he visited to teach or observe what was going on there. But fundamentally he ignores it. And the temple isn’t the only feature of established religious practice that Jesus treats like this.

As you well know, he sits lightly, even disruptively, to conventions like Sabbath observance, purity requirements and obedience to formal religious authority. Though he never preaches systematic ‘disregard for the Torah as such’,¹ Jesus seems to suggest that the law of Israel has been co-opted by those in power. And that means that rather than making visible the character of God and enabling

¹ Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to Saint John of the Cross*, second edition (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1991), p.17.

human connection with God, the enforcement of the law and its distinctions between sacred and profane, clean and unclean, righteous and unrighteous is functioning to block access to God and burden those least able to bear its weight. So Jesus neglects it when he deems it necessary – and quotes the prophets when people criticise him for it: ‘Go and learn what this means, I desire mercy not sacrifice’. Again and again, he points to the God who cannot be contained by religious language, buildings, rituals, systems – who cares not about the state of our external religious observance but only about the state of our heart.

Jesus’ subversive and subverting relationship to the law and religious custom continued to characterise the life of the early church. As the disciples keep following where Jesus led, they discover that a whole raft of taboos and previously unquestioned religio-legal requirements come into question. We see them living out the implications of this in various places as, for example, when Peter learns in his vision of unclean animals that ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane’ (Acts 10.19). We see it as the apostolic community relaxes previously strict religious rules in relation to circumcision, the eating of meat sacrificed to idols and relationships with Gentiles.

Gradually (and with much difficulty and controversy), they come to understand that there are no categories of people, no foods, no diseases, no places that are (by definition) profane, unclean or separate from God. This leads to St Paul’s remarkable proclamation (remarkable, that is, for a former Pharisee) that ‘to those who are pure everything is pure’. It’s in this context that theologian James Alison has described Christianity as a kind of ‘un-religion’ because it subverts the usual way of establishing a sacred sphere by defining it over against the profane.² Interestingly, the Roman authorities also considered the early Christians to be ‘atheists’ – because they refused the cult of the emperor and they did not engage in any recognisably religious, sacrificial practice.

² James Alison, ‘Sacrifice, law and the Catholic faith: is secularity really the enemy?’, in *Broken Hearts & New Creations: Intimations of a Great Reversal* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2010), pp.73-91, p.81.

Well, in the ancient world all this was radically new. But the outworking of the gospel over the centuries means that, in our culture, the idea that God is accessed only by way of specific rites or in specific places or by specifically designated authorities is one we no longer take seriously. Christian faith fundamentally challenges a separation of the world into sacred and profane elements, and that's why many scholars see our contemporary secularism as having its roots in Christianity. But this seems to lead us to somewhat of a conundrum. And that is, if Christianity is a kind of 'un-religion' in the way I've suggested, then does it end up subverting even its own practice? If God is everywhere and everywhere available, does it become impossible to make sense of the church's commitment to ritual form and disciplined practice, to the marking out of sacred space and time? Or to put the point even more starkly, is the collapse we're witnessing of the church in our day (not one stone left upon another), actually the final outworking of the gospel?

Well, I think these are difficult and significant questions – questions that have profound implications for the future of the church and for what it means to practise and proclaim our faith in these days. I feel I have a way to go in thinking them through, but let me suggest a couple of lines of thought that seem important and invite your further reflection.

First, I've said that Jesus is critical of the forms of law and practice he saw around him, just as many secular humanists are critical of what they see as the oppressive and controlling tendencies of some religious institutions. And it seems to me that Christian proclamation does indeed subvert this kind of self-serving religiosity. To the extent that the church has sought to secure its place in the world by violent means, and wherever people's allegiance has been coerced by means of the fear of hell or of social exclusion, then we have to say that the church has acted in a sub-Christian way. The gospel must be a liberation from controlling, manipulative, fear-based religiosity – or it's not good news at all.

But liberation from bad religion isn't the only liberation we're in need of. We also need freeing from what inclines us to seek to control and manipulate one another in these ways, from our anxieties and sense of lack, from our unexamined instincts of self-preservation and self-assertion that distort our relationships with ourselves, one another and the rest of creation. Jesus undergoes the worst of these instincts as he's betrayed and condemned to death, but this turns out to be his gift to us. Because the resurrection reveals that on the other side of death is a more final fact – the un-killable life and mercy of God. For the disciples, this was the experience that made possible a new way of being human for them – unthreatened, forgiving, generous, at one with all. And conversion to Christ just means being drawn through the death of our anxious, self-protecting, self-obsessed selves into this new humanity. It's not just acquiring a new set of beliefs, but being transformed at the level of our being.

Now it's pretty clear that the possibility of this experience, this transformation in being is not controlled by or dependent on the church. My own experience of being liberated by grace happened outside an explicitly religious context – and if you ask about the spiritual journeys of any group of people, you discover similar stories. God is everywhere and everywhere available and at work. Yet, having said that, it was to the church and the gathered community I turned when I wanted to make sense of what had happened in my life and to grow into the fullness of it. The reason the gathering and worship, the practises and sacraments of Christian community matter is not because God is contained or controlled within them, but because they draw us again and again into the dynamic of dying and rising, and the fellowship of those who are following the crucified and risen one. This is what baptism, eucharist and contemplative prayer are all about. These are all intentional practices that lead us through our own 'dying' so as to receive new life as gift, and they put us back in mind (they re-mind us) of the essential shape of the human journey to fullness of life. They help us re-encounter grace and re-commit to the way day by day, week by week.

It's true that, in the light of Jesus' criticism of legalistic and formulaic religiosity, we can sit lightly to the particular forms, words, places where we participate in these sacramental actions. But this isn't the same as thinking we can do without forms altogether, or that we can achieve and deepen our own transformation apart from opening ourselves deliberately, repeatedly to receive the grace of God in the company of the gathered community. What this means for the future practise of Christianity in the time of a collapsing church, I don't fully know ... But that there is a future on the other side of the collapse underway, I trust. Maybe we could even dare believe that we're part of bringing it to birth.