

9 May 2020

## **Our Hearts Are Bigger Than We Know (1 Peter 3.8-9, 13-18a)**

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How do we grow as persons? How is goodness deepened, and wisdom expanded? On the Christian vision, our moral and spiritual growth is a fruit of both human effort and divine grace. Both elements are necessary. For our part, we need to be available, listening, willing to participate and trust. This involves (as I suggested last week) a practice of obedience to God, as well as relinquishing ways of being we know get in the way of receptivity. 1 Peter says, 'Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy and all slander'. And then, wait on God. 'Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation – if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good' (2.1-3).

This last phrase is significant. It's because we have glimpsed something, 'tasted' God's goodness already, that we're drawn to seek it more. And our seeking is answered, so our tradition teaches, by the gift of God's very Spirit which arrives as the formation in us of new qualities of being. Prime among these are what traditional moral teaching calls the 'theological virtues' of faith, hope and love. As these virtues are infused and grow in us, they shape all that we are and do. Indeed the Catechism of the Catholic church holds that they 'are the foundation of Christian moral activity; they animate it and give it its special character'. As we continue our reflections on 'holy living', or the shape of Christian virtue, I want to speak of the significance of these theological virtues, and how we might recognize their emergence in us.

So, first – faith. Faith is often defined in terms of 'belief in God'. Which isn't wrong, but because we don't have a very rich sense of the significance of 'belief', this way of putting things doesn't help us realise what really matters about it. For me, I find it helps to remember that faith concerns our sense of the nature of the world we inhabit. Philosopher and novelist, Iris Murdoch, once pointed out that the choices we make, the actions that seem possible or necessary for us, are profoundly shaped by

our underlying imaginative sense of reality, the way we see things as a whole. This is often a subtle matter. Our pictures of how things most truly are may not be front of mind for us; we may not be explicitly conscious of them. But they are operative.

Murdoch said that some of our most significant moral differences are not because we make different choices within the same world, but because we see different worlds. Someone who lives in a world they assume to be characterised by threat, condemnation or scarcity, inhabits a different reality, and so sees different possibilities, than someone who lives in a world of abundance and welcome.

For the first disciples, their experience of Jesus affected their sense of the world at this fundamental level. Jesus had been among them as their teacher and companion. He'd claimed a particular relationship with God as his 'Abba', Father, and lived a certain kind of life: proclaiming forgiveness, offering mercy and healing, practising radical hospitality towards the religiously and legally excluded, teaching with unusual authority and freedom. As a consequence, he'd threatened the authorities and been executed. Yet, astoundingly, mysteriously, death turned out not to have been the end of him. And when he returned to his disciples, crucified yet somehow alive and still bearing peace, they began to believe that who he was and all he had lived and taught could not be brought to an end. There is a reality that cannot be controlled or cancelled by the violence of the world, and this reality is inexhaustibly for us. This was the faith, the picture of how things most deeply are, that they came to hold and had to share. And it changed everything – the character of their communal and moral life, their religious practice, the way they related to the world around them, and so on. The gift of Christian faith involves coming to see the world in this way.

But how does it grow in us? If we're not first-hand witnesses, as the disciples were, what makes it possible truly to believe the story our tradition tells about the ultimate nature of reality as loving, gracious, merciful. After all, in the face of how things go in the world, it can be a hard picture to sustain. Well, our tradition teaches that it's the practice of deep listening and self-dispossession, in prayer and in life,

that opens us to this knowledge ('though it is beyond knowledge'). John Main taught that as we consent (however fitfully and imperfectly) to yield ourselves to God's keeping, we mysteriously find ourselves held, home. In contemplative practice, we increasingly 'experience' God as Jesus did, not as an object of our perception, but as the ground of being. As this awareness grows in us, then even in times of distress and confusion, when we struggle with a sense of meaninglessness and are tempted to give up on it all, we may discover that almost despite ourselves we are faith-full – full of faith. It's as if we cannot but keep trusting this fragile sense of the truth of things. Somehow it will not let us go. We find ourselves resonating with Peter's response to Jesus: 'Lord, to whom else shall we go? You have the words of eternal life'. The virtue of faith has been infused.

The virtue of hope is then closely related. If this is how we experience the world, then not only is God the ground on which we stand but God is the future towards which we move. Hope is the gift of energy to live from and in accord with this future. In Christian understanding, hope is not 'a natural phenomenon'. It's not optimism, the tendency to anticipate that things will just get better, or naturally improve. In the wake of Jesus' death, the disciples had lost all sense of that kind of hope. So James Alison says the gift or the virtue of hope arrives as a 'rupture in the system'. It breaks in to lives bounded by death and despair, and it draws us to participate in the realisation of God's promise of abundant life, of justice and peace.

In my experience, hope has sometimes unexpectedly erupted when I am deeply present to the suffering and pain of what I cannot change. There dawns some inexplicable confidence that 'all will be well', and a sense too of there being traction between what is now and what is not yet. A quality of expectancy. As if something has already happened, something can already be trusted, but there remains a necessary work of remaining true to that reality. So while hope entails a sense of waiting on its fulfilment, it's not passive – just sitting around, filling in the time, until God does something. Hope implicates us; our alertness and attentiveness, our acting in accord with its promise, matters.

Alison writes movingly of the difference between ‘hope’ as ‘hope of rescue’ and ‘hope’ as the patient forging of a counter-story in the midst of the world’s violence. The New Testament letters call for patience, endurance, perseverance in connection with hope. As we heard this evening, 1 Peter exhorts his readers in the face of their persecutors: ‘Do not fear what they fear; and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence (3.14-15). ‘It is hope’, Alison says, ‘that empowers us to bear the crushing violence of the world’ precisely because it keeps us in mind of the one who underwent this violence and yet was raised to newness of life.

Which brings us, finally, to love. Like all the theological virtues, the virtue of love is sourced in the being of God. And God is the God who makes the ‘sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous’ (Matthew 5.45). The love of God is not based on preference or partiality; it is not earned or merited. God simply is love and when we love with the love of God then we are capable of loving our enemies and praying for those who persecute us. We do not repay evil for evil, but repay with a blessing. Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz captures the felt experience of this love in relation to the self. He writes:

Love means to learn to look at yourself  
The way one looks at distant things  
For you are only one thing among many.  
And whoever sees that way heals his heart,  
Without knowing it, from various ills.  
A bird and a tree say to him: Friend.<sup>1</sup>

Love heals and befriends. And it seems to me this sense of looking at ourselves ‘the way one looks at distant things’ is true also of what it means to love others with the love of God. Milosz writes of someone who has learned to love: ‘Then he wants to use himself and things/So that they stand in the glow of ripeness’.

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<sup>1</sup> Czeslaw Milosz, ‘Love’ in *New & Collected Poems 1931-2001*

This is about seeing ourselves, seeing others, seeing the world 'whole', as they are in the light of God. The 'glow of ripeness' is a fruit of 'letting be'. The sense of 'distance' here is not that of uncaring indifference or uninvolvedness, but of non-possessiveness. For it is the non-possessive love of God and God's love for the world, that animates and makes true my love. It frees the other from my agenda, my preoccupations and projections. It gives us hearts that are bigger than we know.

So, faith, hope and love. These are virtues, habits of being, that are directly tied to the nature of God – to Trinitarian life. It is because of who God is that they arise in us as we are opened to the divine life; and as we receive them, we are conformed more fully to that life. What strikes me in the felt experience of these virtues is an element of non-attachment. There's little ground for pride or moral satisfaction here – just gratitude at finding these dispositions growing in us, and realising the difference they make for our way of being in the world.

Though of course, just because they are not our achievement or possession, we are never secure in our exercise of these virtues. Hope can erupt unexpectedly and graciously, but I still have moments of despair; faith holds me fast, but I still have times of anxiety and doubt. And love – well, speaking for myself, that steady, merciful regard for myself and others as we are in the light of God's gaze, may be the most difficult of all to sustain.

So we are infused with these virtues and we grow in them only to the extent that we're willing to keep letting go, being handed over in radical prayer and self-forgetting, to the life of God. This is a journey without end. Yet at the same time, we do experience ourselves being changed. Our growth in faith, hope and love affects how we see, how we are, how we act. This is why they are 'the foundation of Christian moral life' and how they give it its special character. And what this means for our life together will be our focus next week.