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Wisdom Vindicated (Matthew 11.2-19, 25-27)

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‘Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?’ (Matthew 11.3) If your whole life has been about anticipating the coming of God’s Messiah, this is pretty much the key question. It’s also, in some ways, kind of humiliating. I can imagine some of those around John the Baptist, perhaps even some of those sent by him to inquire of Jesus, saying to themselves: ‘You mean you don’t know if he’s the one?? You’ve been calling people to repentance for years, baptizing them in the wilderness, talking up the coming kingdom. But you don’t know what you’re looking for? You’re not sure you’ll recognize it when you see it?’ Sheesh – that’s a worry!

It’s easy enough to imagine where John the Baptist might be coming from. Though he’s previously identified Jesus as Messiah when he baptized him in the Jordan, things aren’t now unfolding as John might have expected. The powers that be seem still firmly in place and he himself is in prison, ‘facing an uncertain future, which would in fact be his execution’. John begins to wonder ‘whether he had really been right to point to Jesus as the one who was to come’.¹ Has he been mistaken? In fact, has his whole life been mistaken – has everything he’s done and said been in vain?

Jesus does not answer John’s question directly. He just points to what’s happening around him, and instructs John’s emissaries to report what they hear and see in words that allude to a series of passages from the prophet Isaiah, ‘which tell of the coming of the Lord and what will happen on the day [the Lord] comes’.² How the blind will see, the lame walk, the dead be raised, and the poor have good news proclaimed to them. That’s what Jesus wants John to know is happening, and he invites John to recognize what must be true of him (Jesus), given this.

¹ James Alison, ‘Like children sitting in the market place’ in *Broken Hearts & New Creations* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2010), p.95.

² Alison, ‘Like children sitting in the market place’, p.96.

But then Jesus turns to the crowd and puts John's question back to them. He wants to know what *they* think is going on, how they see him. He asks what they think about John, first of all. 'What did you go out into the wilderness to look at?' A reed shaken by the wind? A pampered courtier? Were you just caught up in the latest fad – going along with the crowd as John's message went 'viral' in Jerusalem? Or did you go out to see a prophet? Well, you know what, he was a prophet – but did you know he is even more than a prophet? He was the messenger to come before God himself came as promised by the prophet Malachi (Mal.3), the messenger identified as Elijah (Mal.4.5). 'If you are willing to accept it', Jesus says to them, 'he is Elijah who is to come. Let anyone with ears listen!' In other words, if you can really hear who John the Baptist was, then you will also recognize who I am.

But the problem with you lot, Jesus goes on, with 'this generation' is that you can't see any of this clearly. John came fasting and some of you dismissed him – you said he has a demon. The Son of Man comes feasting and some of you dismiss me – you say I am a glutton and a drunkard and friend of reprobates. But you don't recognize the rhythm of things, the pattern that makes sense of us both and that would allow you to receive what we have come to offer. Alluding to the Book of Ecclesiastes, Jesus wants them to know that there is a time for everything – a time proper to penitence and preparation, and a time proper to fulfilment and rejoicing.³ 'For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted; ... a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance' (3.1-4).

Jesus is saying the failure to recognize when it was time to fast with John, and when it is time to feast with him, reflects a lack of wisdom in the responses of 'this generation' and (in the language of Ecclesiastes) lack of wisdom leads always to futility. Like the futility of children who will not flow with the movement of their games, 'so nobody plays'. One band of children saying, 'We played the flute for you and you did not dance', while the other band complains, 'we wailed, and you did not mourn'. It is

³ This is Alison's insight: 'Like children sitting in the market place', p.94.

wisdom that discerns the times, the pattern of divine action and so is capable of recognizing, of flowing with and participating in what God is doing now. Hence, says Jesus, 'wisdom is vindicated by her deeds'.

Well, this is a pretty dense argument. In the gospel passage, the focus is on the question of Jesus' identity. How **do** you recognize the presence of God in the world? How do you become capable of perceiving divine action in the midst of flux? Those around Jesus were getting bogged in futile argument about him. And this got me thinking about how futility and breakdown in our relations with each other might be a clue to where too we are failing to catch on. An indicator of where we too might be missing what God wants to be making possible among us.

I think, for example, of some of the futile arguments between factions in the church; some of the futile stand-offs in the political realm, even of futile patterns in some of our personal relationships. Each side convinced that the way they see things, the way they want to play, is the only way – and blaming the other side for not joining them. One band of children says, 'we want to preserve traditional marriage, and you won't play along'. The other, 'we want to honour gay relationships, and you won't let us'. We want to mine coal, we want to save the reef – and you're spoiling the fun we could all be having.

I don't for a minute suggest that these disagreements are of no real moment – I certainly have a view about which game we ought to be playing in each of these examples. But the way we are currently arguing about them doesn't seem to be getting us anywhere, and it doesn't seem to be setting us free or helping life to flow. In some of the biblical writings, Wisdom is personified and understood as having been with God at the creation of the world. In this tradition, the opposite of Wisdom is vanity, and vanity is described as 'like the wind, going round and round, going nowhere'. According to theologian James Alison, this is what Jesus is charging against his contemporaries in their response to him. 'They have got bogged down into vanity, going nowhere at all, with their culture breaking down into mutual recrimination'. Yet, nevertheless, Alison says, in Jesus 'Wisdom *is* at work, bringing all things to be in a way

that is artful, full of meaning and vitality – the very opposite of vanity, where everything goes round and round in ever more cantankerous circles, grinding down into paralysis’.⁴

How do we get access to this Wisdom, this capacity to participate in the creativity of divine life? After Jesus has had a go at his contemporaries for their lack of wisdom, he says: ‘I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants: yes, Father, for such was your gracious will’. It’s a passage reminiscent of St Paul writing to the Corinthians, ‘Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?’ Our tradition proclaims that knowledge of God which is true wisdom, is not something we attain by cleverness or merely intellectual understanding; it is the fruit of humility, child-likeness, dependence on gift. It is only humble openness, the relinquishing of self-sufficiency, that connects us to the real truth of things – the divine life animating all. It’s only this willing vulnerability that allows us more reliably to perceive and participate in what God is doing. And this is what our meditation is about.

How does this way of being make a difference to *our* culture’s places of stuckness and futility? It’s not going to erase disagreement. Yet there is a profound difference between arguing from a place of unyielding attachment to my version of things, versus discerning disagreement from a place of humble responsiveness to a truth we never fully master or possess. John Main wrote that ‘wisdom requires that we learn to live out of the resources of [God’s] light and energy. To be wise is to be in harmony with it and vitalized by it’.⁵ This doesn’t mean being wishy-washy in our commitments. It doesn’t mean the avoidance of all conflict or straight-talking. It’s just that when we live in harmony with this deeper energy, we are liberated from ego-ic reactivity and defensiveness; and because of this, even where we disagree, there remains the possibility that we might become able truly to play together, as we grow into a fuller responsiveness to divine meaning and truth.

⁴ Alison, ‘Like children sitting in the market place’, p.95.

⁵ John Main, *Monastery Without Walls: The Spiritual Letters of John Main* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2006), p.195.

And even where someone we disagree with refuses to let go their fixed version of things and the game they are ego-ically determined to impose, even then – something is different because of where we come from, just as Jesus brought the vitality of divine wisdom and life into contact with the stuckness and intransigence of those he encountered and transformed them. This is the wisdom that vindicates Jesus as the one who is to come; and it is into this same life-generating wisdom that we too are being inducted by faith and prayer – so as to participate in his renewing of the earth.