

3 July 2021

Go and Do Likewise (Mark 6. 1-13)

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In the last three weeks, we've been reflecting on the question 'how God acts'. I've been trying to draw out how divine action (on Christian understanding) may be differentiated from superstition or magical thinking. We've seen that in classical theology, God is not to be imagined as a kind of supernatural agent – like us, only bigger – who intervenes from time to time in the world's affairs. Rather, God simply is the ever-present, self-offering love on which all creation depends, in which everything is sourced. On this account, if we want to speak of something like a particular 'act' of God, we cannot think in terms of God suddenly doing something different, suddenly interrupting the created order. It's more as if the created order has, in a particular time and place, become more transparent to, or receptive of, the one continuous and underlying act of God's presence and purpose.

Rowan Williams suggests a metaphor. He says we might imagine the texture of the world being of 'uneven thickness' – as in, perhaps, the Celtic notion of 'thin places'. And in human terms, Simone Weil says that what makes us 'thinner', in the sense of more transparent to God, is when 'the ego renounces or displaces itself'.¹ 'Thy will be done'. This resonates, I think, with what we know from our experience. Self-dispossessing prayer, self-offering faith does seem to allow God or grace to 'break through' more fully into our lives. This breaking through doesn't guarantee we get what we want, of course – it doesn't necessarily solve all our troubles, or cure our illnesses. But it does transform us – connects us more deeply to love. And this means that one of the ways God's action breaks into the world is through human lives – through persons in whom God's life is allowed to come more perceptibly to

¹ Rowan Williams, *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology*, ed. Mike Higton (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2007), p.269.

the surface and be incarnate. Which is how, as Teresa of Avila said, we may ourselves become God's hands and feet in the world.

Today's reading sees Jesus' disciples commissioned to be his 'hands and feet'. They've just spent time in Jesus' hometown, which looks to have been particularly 'thick-skinned', particularly unreceptive to the grace of God among them. So Jesus has left there and gone out to teach among nearby villages, and he calls the twelve to go out yet further. He gives them authority to act for him, giving them power over 'unclean spirits' as well as to anoint and cure the sick. And throughout the ages, Christians have understood discipleship in terms of the call to perform these same deeds of mercy and love. As Luke puts it at the end of the parable of the Good Samaritan, those who would follow Jesus are to 'Go and do likewise'. I'm delighted to let you know that, in coming weeks, our series on *divine* action will be culminating with reflections from people within and around our community about their involvement in the 'action of God' through their work and ministry.

As we contemplate our call to the 'active life', however, there's a potential slippage I want us to be aware of. It may seem a subtle point, but a lot depends on it. It's to do with how we see the relationship between our acts and the underlying act and being of God. So let me have a go at expressing this!

One way we can read Jesus' commissioning of his disciples, his call to 'go and do likewise', is in terms of model or example. Jesus has shown 'what the Lord requires'. His acts reveal what 'righteous' action looks like and so what we ourselves must do. And there's something true and important in this. Yet, if this is all there is to it, if our relationship with Jesus is *reduced* to having him as our model, then what tends to happen is that once we've got a handle on the basic pattern of action, we increasingly dispense with Jesus himself. He has taught us to value forgiveness over vengefulness, inclusion over exclusion, reconciliation over alienation. But once we've got this vision, what's to stop us adopting his values and commitments while carrying on without him? Thus is born secular humanism. And not only that, but also the functional atheism of many church communities and welfare agencies whose

programs of 'good works' often refer to Jesus' example ['what would Jesus do'], but proceed with little intrinsic connection to his living presence.

The point I'm trying to make is one that Dietrich Bonhoeffer insisted on in his *Ethics*. Discussing Jesus' call that we love one another as God loves us, Bonhoeffer wrote that this 'must not be misunderstood as if the divine love ... preceded human love, but only in order to activate it as an autonomous human doing'.² The key phrase here is 'autonomous human doing'. Bonhoeffer's insight is that all too often we understand the command to love one another as if this is something we *could* do if only we tried hard enough. But this isn't how it works. It's only as we let ourselves *be loved* by God, that we become those through whom the love of God flows. We cannot generate the love with which we are called to love others out of our own resources; the love with which we are to love our neighbours is not ours, but God's.

So it is with righteous action. As long as we're trying to do 'good works' under our own steam, sourced in our own will and energies, then however sincere our motives and attempts, our acts will not communicate the underlying act of God, will not channel God's freedom and peace in the world. And this shows up in a range of ways. For one thing, our acts lack power. Think of that story later in Mark's gospel of the disciples failing to cast out an evil spirit that possesses a boy. When Jesus succeeds, they ask him why they could not cast it out, and he responds: 'This kind can come out only through prayer' (9.29). And I take it that he's saying that they and their attempted action weren't sufficiently connected to the source.

For another thing, when our 'good works' are sourced in our own will and energies, they tend to become part of our self-image, attached to our ego-ic identities. Which is why we often see that slight air of smugness among Christian communities, and among certain activists and progressives; there's a self-satisfaction, a complacency in self-possessed righteousness and its effect is to constrain rather than liberate, to condescend rather than empower those who are on the receiving end.

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 6, ed. Clifford J. Green, Trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West and Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), p.337.

And for yet another thing, when we stop being continuously responsive to a living call, then our action tends to lose its orientation and meaning. Bonhoeffer has startling words to say about this. He cites Jesus saying in John's gospel: 'Without me you can do nothing', and he goes on: 'This sentence must be understood in the strictest sense. There really is no doing without Jesus Christ. All the multiple activities that otherwise have the appearance of doing, all the countless tasks, are considered in Jesus' judgement as if nothing had been done'. Only in relationship to God, he says, can genuine doing be distinguished from 'pseudo-doing'.³

A peril of the 'active life' in our age, I think, is that our overwhelming awareness of all that's wrong with the world readily leads to burn out or despair. And I wonder if part of what Bonhoeffer is getting at is that we can rush around hyperactively, giving ourselves the illusion of engagement, but still miss the heart of our calling, still not 'do' what is really ours to do. Jesus comes to do nothing but the will of the Father. This is what orients all he does and renders his action effective; this is where our acts, too, must be sourced.

These are complex themes, and I'm conscious they need more exploration. Please don't hear me saying that there's no need for us to take action or to put ourselves out; no need to be bold, committed and sometimes really tired in the service of the people and the world we love. What I'm trying to get at is the *ground* of our action – where it is ultimately founded. And this includes our everyday, obligatory actions as well as those called forth by particular issues and needs. The question is, to what extent does our 'doing' emerge from our connection to the grace and freedom and love of God? To what extent is it just an anxious hyperactivity that fails to transform what it touches?

This is why, on Christian understanding, contemplation and right action necessarily go together. Contemplation is about the radical connection of our being to God's being, the surrender of our will to God's will. When Jesus sends his disciples out to be his hands and feet, he bids them go in this radically self-dispossessed way,

³ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p.327.

stripped of any illusions of self-sufficiency. 'He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics'. Their power to do good in the world is intrinsically connected to their dependence on and receptivity to the gift of God. And I wonder how this instruction might translate in our context? He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a commitment to the way... no five-year strategic plan, no rolling funding agreement based on key performance indicators; no executive bonuses in their belts. Of course, there's nothing wrong with planning, per se – nothing wrong with prudent management of resources. But when these become our hedge against deep listening, when they take the place of radical responsiveness, and turn us in upon ourselves rather than opening us to the infinite resource of God's life and love – well, perhaps that's when our doing becomes 'pseudo-doing' and our action, ultimately, faithless.

There's a beautiful prayer of 'sending' at the end of the Anglican Eucharistic service, which expresses something of what I've been trying to say, so let me end with it: 'Most loving God, you send us into the world you love. Give us grace to go thankfully and with courage, in the power of your Spirit'. And so, Amen.