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Faith in Action: Dark Night of the Season (Ephesians 4. 17-24)

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Over these past weeks, we've been exploring themes of divine and human action. How does God act in the world and what does this divine life call forth in human terms? Where are signs of transformation that reveal God at work within and among us, forming our common life in justice, mercy and love? How might we celebrate these signs and be encouraged by them to continue hopeful and play our part?

These questions have particular urgency in our times. On the one hand, we're ever more conscious of existential threat – global heating, biodiversity loss, mass migration, war, ideological division and profound inequality all threaten the future of life on earth. On the other hand, we sense a dangerous opportunity given by the enforced interruption of business as usual by the pandemic. Could this be the turning point? Are the peoples of the world capable of seizing this moment to redirect the course of things? In his recent book, *Let Us Dream: the Path to a Better Future*, Pope Francis quotes a line from the poet Friedrich Hölderlin: 'Where the danger is, also grows the saving power'. And the Pope writes, 'That's the genius in the human story: there's always a way to escape destruction. Where humankind has to act is precisely there, in the threat itself; that's where the door opens'.¹

And yet, despite this encouragement, despite the voices of hope we've heard in the last few weeks, it's easy to be overwhelmed by the scale and complexity of the issues that face us. Some of us are painfully aware that our capacity for action is limited by illness, age or other constraining circumstance – we're just getting through each day as best we can. Even for those of us with more freedom to act, it feels never enough. So although there are shoots of goodness and care everywhere, we can also have a pervasive sense of battling constantly and ineffectually with the systemic preponderance of those who are, in Paul's words, 'darkened in their

¹ Pope Francis, *Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2020), p.6.

understanding, alienated from the life of God because of their ignorance and hardness of heart' (Eph. 4.18).

If we think of the corruption and evasion of accountability of some in government, the self-interest of influencers and lobbyists, the refusal of care for the natural world and the diabolical fuelling of division by social media algorithms, then Paul's complaint about the society in which he lived resonates deeply: 'They have lost all sensitivity and have abandoned themselves to licentiousness, greedy to practice every kind of impurity' (Eph. 4.19). Living in the midst of this can make *our* well-meaning efforts seem futile and puny, leaving us agitated, impotent, hopeless and enraged.

So what's a Christian response to all this? Are we simply to acknowledge that our hope is interspersed, at times, with a sense of anguished futility, and then press on regardless – holding faith as best we can to the good, giving ourselves for its realisation despite everything? Well, yes, I think that's largely right. Someone this week sent me a reflection by Joanna Macy, an environmental activist and scholar of Buddhism. Discussing similar themes, Macy writes: 'In this respect, I've always appreciated the way the Zen tradition frames its Bodhisattva vows: simultaneously vowing to do our utmost, while pointing to the impossibility of achieving these same vows ...

Sentient beings are numberless; we vow to liberate them.

Delusions are inexhaustible; we vow to transcend them.

Dharma teachings are boundless; we vow to master them.

The Wisdom Way of Enlightenment is supreme; we vow to embody it.

And she goes on: 'There's something comforting about acknowledging that paradox, that for me at least, helps mitigate despair. What we're facing into IS overwhelming, but even so, we do what we can'.²

² Cited in Jill Shepherd: Insight Meditation News, 'Despair and Transformation', July-August 2021 © 2021 Jill Shepherd.

What Macy also knows, however, is that this ‘doing what we can’ can’t just be about gritted teeth and dogged determination, the suppression of despair and triumph of will. In fact, it’s only as we ‘do our despair work’, as she puts it, only as we allow a ‘disintegration’ of the defences and evasions that keep us from the truth of suffering and our own grief, that our hearts can break open to connect us to the whole and enable a new way of perceiving and loving the world.³

In the language of the Christian tradition, this is what John of the Cross called, the ‘dark night of soul’. A ‘dark night’ is not just a set of painful circumstances that may precipitate feelings of despair, abandonment, sorrow. It’s a disintegration of the self’s ‘customary style of acting and experiencing’;⁴ the stripping of illusions of control and self-sufficiency, of established frameworks of meaning and consolation. This night is often excruciating and yet, for John, it’s also a kind of grace – a gift. Because this stripping, being brought to poverty of spirit, a sense of our own powerlessness and ‘nothingness’, is the condition of the soul’s union with God. It’s how we become who we are created to be – radically dependent on God, and so capable of being and doing like God, our actions faithful and wise.

This is familiar territory for us – as you know, I’ve spoken often of the need for our human action to be sourced not in our ego-ic ideas and commitments (no matter how well-meaning), but in God. Pope Francis speaks of the necessity of decentring and transcending the ego-ic self.⁵ Yet, as we come to the end of this series of reflections on action, I want to stress that this decentring applies, not only to the *source* of our action, but also our relationship to the *outcome* or fruit of our action.

If I think of my own tendency to become agitated about the state of things, it’s partly a measure of my love for the world and its people. But it’s also connected to my attachment to ‘fixing’ and ‘saving’ the world, to a refusal to ‘be with’ the

³ Joanna Macy, ‘The Greatest Danger’, Winter 2011, in *Tricycle: Buddhist Review* <https://tricycle.org/magazine/greatest-danger/> (accessed 30 July 2021).

⁴ Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to Saint John of the Cross*, revised edition (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1990), p.176.

⁵ Pope Francis, *Let Us Dream*, p.135.

possibility of the world's death. But does even *this* attachment need to be handed over?

St Paul exhorts believers to 'put away your former way of life, your old self ... and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self'. This he describes, in a striking phrase, as 'learning Christ' (Eph. 4.20). For John of the Cross, the central characteristic of Christ is his radical self-abandonment to God, in the face of death and in advance of any guarantee that his life will have accomplished its purpose, that any good will come or, indeed, that the world will be saved. There is a 'for nothingness' in faithful action – living (as Meister Eckhart said) 'without a why'. Joanna Macy writes: 'Let's drop the notion that we can manage our planet for our own comfort and profit—or even that we can now be its ultimate redeemers. It is a delusion. Let's accept, in its place, the radical uncertainty of our time, even the uncertainty of survival'. This isn't giving up care or responsibility or hope; it's giving up the self-referencing and agitating attachment to pre-determined outcomes. For it's this attachment that gets in the way of truly disinterested, other-centred and so godly action.

The Christian tradition testifies that there's something about this radically self-dispossessing action and prayer that allows God to manifest in fuller ways. Not that it coaxes God into 'rescuing' us because we've earned it, but that it somehow makes fuller room for grace. And grace is non-linear; it operates by a different logic. Macy again: 'When we stop distracting ourselves, trying to figure the chances of ultimate success or failure, our minds and hearts are liberated into the present moment. And this moment together is alive and charged with possibilities'.

So ... we've been focusing on action – divine and human – in the context of rising agitation about the future of the world. We want to be part of the solution; we want to speak, act and pray in ways that are part of the world's healing and flourishing. So far, so gospel. But we cannot know the whole of what's needed – or how all the connections work – or what might be something quite small (a courageous word, a loving look, a simple kind act) that is part of the web of healing. Edith Stein, a

Carmelite like John of the Cross, who died in Auschwitz, wrote 'Certainly the most decisive turning points in world history are substantially co-determined by souls whom no history book ever mentions. And we will only find out about those souls to whom we owe the decisive turning points ... on the day when all that is hidden is revealed'.⁶ And this suggests that faithful action, faith in action, is both sourced in God and its outcome radically yielded to God. We're responsible for discerning what's called forth from each of us as truly and generously as we can, in the circumstances of our lives; we're responsible for paying attention and loving the real, for suffering with the world and serving our neighbour. The rest is God's for, in the words of this beautiful prayer by Thomas Merton⁷:

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.
Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will
does not mean that I am actually doing so.
But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.
And I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing.
I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.
And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road
though I may know nothing about it.
Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost
and in the shadow of death.
I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and will never leave me
to face my perils alone.
Amen.

⁶ Cited in Pope Francis, *Let Us Dream*, p.137.

⁷ From *Thoughts in Solitude*, originally published 1956 (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1999), p.79.