



26 February 2022

Reality Check (Luke 6.39-49)

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‘He also told them a parable: “Can a blind person guide a blind person? Will not both fall into a pit? A disciple is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully qualified will be like the teacher’ (Luke 6.39-40). This sounds like formation for ministry. Jesus is addressing his disciples in the hearing of the crowd. According to Luke, he’s just been speaking of his radical vision of life and its promise – a vision in which the poor and persecuted, rather than the rich and popular, are ultimately blessed, and where treasure is found by giving your entitlement away, practising mercy and forgiving those who’ve done you wrong. It’s counter-intuitive, but Jesus is inviting his hearers into a felt experience of the abundance of God, the abundance of life, even in the midst of pain, injustice and scarcity. Don’t be taken in by appearances, he seems to be saying, or even by your own hurt; grace abounds, despite everything. Can you realise that? Can you unclench your broken heart, receive it and let it flow through you? And you, my disciples, can you communicate this possibility to others?

Well, to teach the way, you must know the way yourself – and clearly Jesus doubts that his disciples do. Commentator Mikeal Parsons writes: ‘Jesus uses the well-known proverb of the futility of the blind leading the blind ... to make the point that unless the disciples’ perceptions are transformed and reoriented ... they will remain spiritually blind and unable to lead others in this new way of life’.¹ On the up side, however, Jesus seems to think their transformation is possible. He notes that disciples are not above their teacher; but if they are ‘fully qualified’ – in Greek, the verb means ‘to make someone completely adequate or sufficient for something’ – if they are ‘fully qualified’ they will become *like* the teacher, knowing the way to life. How do you become qualified? According to what Jesus says next, it involves a

¹ Mikeal Parsons, *Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), p.113.

process of deepening self-knowledge and truthfulness, a reality check, in at least three dimensions.

First, disciples must learn to see things as they really are – which involves (much of time) realising how limited our vision of reality actually is. Richard Rohr is fond of saying, ‘we do not see things as they are, but as we are’. Jesus says: ‘Why do you see the speck in your neighbour’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own?’ He doesn’t deny that our neighbour may indeed have a ‘speck’ in their eye, or that things may not be in the world as they could be. Nevertheless, if you attempt to remove such blemishes without even realising the extent to which your vision is limited, perhaps even impeded by a ruddy great log, then you will see nothing ‘out there’ clearly. Logs in the form of cultural blindspots like white, male or class privilege; personal logs like a chip on your shoulder, a fixed view of your righteousness, a tendency to think yourself misunderstood or a compulsive desire to be needed or valued. We do not see things as they are, but as we are. So becoming like the teacher, capable of leading others as Jesus does to fullness of life, requires a cleansing of our perception.

Second, in this formative process, we must attend to our inner being, the state of our heart. Jesus assumes, says Parsons, ‘there is an integral and intimate connection’ between our inner and outer life, between ‘who a person is and what a person does’.² Our habits of heart, in other words, are not a purely personal, let alone private, matter – for ‘out of the abundance’ or the ‘overflow’ of the heart flows good or ill for the world. But how do we learn our heart’s state? How do we get in touch with the truth of our being? Not, suggests Jesus, by focusing in the first instance on the sincerity of our intentions – on what we mean to be and do; nor by focusing on we say about ourselves, our self-image – whether that’s positive (I’m a good person) or negative (I’m useless, I’m bad). Instead, if we really want to know the state of our heart, we must look at what we actually find ourselves doing and saying, at what’s happening in the lives of those we touch. Jesus says it’s our way of

² Parsons, *Luke*, p.114.

being in the world that both expresses and makes manifest the heart: 'each tree is known by its own fruit'. 'Figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush'. There is a hinterland to speech and action that either nourishes or harms the life of the world. If we want to be people who bring forth good treasure, that involves getting real about our being and its impact.

And finally, in the third of these teachings on formation, Jesus speaks of the necessity of the rubber hitting the road. If we want to become like the teacher, knowing the way to life, then we must move from liking the idea to living out of the reality; from theory to practice. John Main often spoke of how easy it was to get intoxicated and inspired by the Christian vision of abundant life, and yet fail to realise it in our experience. Jesus complains of those who seem to be full of enthusiasm and commitment, those who talk the talk, but who, when it comes down to it, refuse to act, refuse to entrust themselves to the way. 'Why do you call me "Lord, Lord" and do not do what I tell you?' Such a person who hears but does not act, is like someone building a house on the ground without a foundation. Ideas, even ideas that express the truth of things, cannot by themselves withstand the storms of life. A foundation must be dug in practice – the Word must become flesh, incarnate.

So, three dimensions in which Jesus wants his disciples to get real about themselves. Real about how they see, how they are, and about whether they're actually on the way. None of this is easy. Our vision is affected by the blindspots of our culture and context, as well as our own (often painful) histories. Changing what and how we see challenges us at many levels – our sense of identity, our sense of our own goodness and meaning. Think how hard it is for many white Australians to come to 'see' our colonial past as First Nations people do, how *threatening* that can be for some. Likewise, our habits of heart, our inner beings, are formed and deformed by the experiences we've had, and it's a task to let ourselves be healed, to grow in integrity such that our lives reliably issue in fruit that is good for the world, and is not bitter to taste or thorny to reach. As for truly entrusting ourselves in practice to the

counter-intuitive way of abundance that Jesus teaches – a way of undefended-ness, generosity, non-grasping and self-forgetting – this involves confronting our fear of the unknown and our deep and natural compulsion to want to stay in control.

So how do we grow in reality? How do we learn to live in such a way that the reality Jesus speaks of becomes real for us, so that we become capable of communicating its truth? I know of no better way to begin than the practice of contemplation. Falling silent, becoming present, letting go our stories about ourselves and others, opening ourselves to God, being vulnerable to Truth as best we can. The more we practise, the less defensive we become about **our** way of seeing and defining the world, the more able we're to look from another perspective, hear another voice. Slowly, our perception clarifies, becomes more attuned to what is. And slowly, we discover more truly how we are; slowly, integrity is forged. To practise contemplation is to be on the way – it enacts Jesus' teaching of self-entrustment, letting go, generosity of spirit. It establishes us on a firm foundation, dug deeply into the rock that is reality, that is Christ. And from here, our actions newly flow.

Still the storms come. The suffering of the world goes on – we and our loved ones get sick, many struggle to survive, a despot declares war and suddenly millions are threatened and displaced, and the world changes. But the more we learn to inhabit our lives and our world truthfully, grounded in the real, the more we're present in the midst of things as Jesus was – true, faithful, courageous and loving. We become those who make visible the God whose love is constantly beckoning and sustaining, pouring out grace on those who will receive. We become like our teacher.