

From Impasse to Wisdom (Matthew 13. 51-58)

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“Have you understood all this?”, Jesus asked his disciples. ‘They answered: “Yes”’ (Matthew 13.51).

I wonder about the tone of that ‘yes’. Was it, ‘yes!’, as in absolutely, of course, yep – we’ve followed, we’re with you, let’s move on ... Or was it ‘ye-e-e-es’ as in, sort of, we think so, it’s probably not gonna get much clearer! As Matthew portrays events, Jesus poses this question after a fairly solid run of parables about the kingdom of heaven, in which he draws on analogies ranging from treasure hidden in a field, to a merchant in search of fine pearls, to a net catching fish both good and bad, some of which are tossed into the furnace of fire. Have you understood all this? Well, more or less ...

Over the past month, we’ve been exploring the ways in which the Jesus of Matthew’s gospel explicitly identifies himself with the figure of divine Wisdom, Wisdom with a capital ‘W’. In the Wisdom literature of the Hebrew bible, Wisdom is personified as the active, creative, loving intelligence present *with* God, present *as* God, at the foundation of the world. Think of Wisdom’s speech in the Book of Proverbs: ‘When God established the heavens, I was there, when he drew a circle on the face of the deep, when he made firm the skies above ... then I was beside him, like a master worker, and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race’ (Proverbs 8.27-31). Jesus’ astonishing claim is that he is this Wisdom’s embodied presence. He is Wisdom’s power and truth at work *within* the life of the world. ‘Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds’, Jesus has said (11.19), when accounting for his actions; and ‘I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world’ (13.35).

And yet, paradoxically, the wisdom of Jesus, the Wisdom Jesus is, struggles to make itself known and to communicate its gift. Most of those around him do not

recognise him, and cannot understand what he says and does. Jesus diagnoses their incomprehension in terms of quasi-culpable incapacity: they have ears but do not hear, he says, eyes but do not see and their heart has grown dull (13.15). Again and again, he tries to wake them up, to draw them into a fuller way of knowing. Thus, his use of parables, metaphors, similes, unexpected juxtapositions and unconventional acts. It's as if he wants to jolt his hearers into new possibilities for understanding and for being, by confounding their expectations, bringing them to the limits of their habituated way of seeing and knowing.

So how's that been working for him? You might recall that our series began at Chapter 11 of Matthew's gospel, verse 1: 'Now when Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and proclaim his message in their cities' (11.1). As we've just heard, this block of teaching concludes with more-or-less the same formula: 'When Jesus had finished these parables, he left that place' (13.53). Job done. Except ... what's the first thing that happens in the next chapter of his ministry? He goes to his hometown, he begins to teach in the synagogue, and – all over again – people refuse to hear him. 'Where did this man get this wisdom and these deeds of power? Is not this the carpenter's son?' Don't we know his family? Who does he think he is? 'And they took offence at him'.

In the passage we read four weeks ago, Jesus had responded to questions concerning his identity, by pointing to his deeds: the blind receiving their sight, the lame walking, the lepers being cleansed. 'And', he'd said 'blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me' (11.4-6). Four weeks and two gospel chapters later, and they're offended yet again. Has anyone learnt anything? Or is Jesus simply up against a brick wall in human being? A lack of hospitality to truth, mercy, solidarity? And if so, how is Wisdom ever to break through, to break in, so as to free and heal a world turned in on itself, ensnarled by petty power plays, lack of awareness, futile game-playing, and the

forces of de-creation? Seemingly, things in the gospel are at an impasse;¹ 'he did not do many deeds of power there, because of their unbelief' (13.58).

As I've sat with this passage, one of the things that strikes me is the way in which Jesus and his disciples seem to be in a kind of parallel process. In order to convey the fullness of God's way, Jesus wants to liberate his hearers from some of their default ways of being and knowing, their habits of fear, aggression, acquisition. This involves the use of parables – stories that help us see ourselves differently – but there's more to it than that. He consistently draws those who want to learn from him past self-reliance and conventional systems of goodness, past their capacity to control or make sense of their lives in the old terms. The disciples are called from their fishing nets, from their families, from their respectable places in the synagogue, from beyond the lives they've known. For them, the water is deep and getting deeper.

But (and this is the parallel process), Jesus isn't communicating God's way from a safe distance, depositing it from on high. Rather, he embodies it right in the midst of them, himself letting go the security of anonymity and family life, himself increasingly misunderstood and threatened. In the verses immediately following our passage, Jesus receives news of the beheading of John the Baptist by King Herod. Matthew writes: 'Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself' (14.13). The water is deep and getting deeper. It's as if Jesus and his disciples both are being drawn into the necessity of ever-deepening faith, ever-deepening reliance on the One who beckons, through the narrowing and darkening, even the felt sense of losing their way.

The great 16th century Spanish mystic, John of the Cross, spoke of 'the dark night' of the soul as intrinsic to the process of spiritual maturing. It's in this undergoing, John says, that the meaning of God is truly learned and human being is truly transformed. Why? Because it's only by losing our way, losing ourselves, being dispossessed of all that is false in us, self-centred and self-reliant, that we may receive

¹ The notion of 'impasse' comes from Constance Fitzgerald (1984), 'Impasse and Dark Night', <https://iccdinstitute.org/impasse-and-dark-night/>

the fullness of God, and so begin to live *from* gift, *at* peace and *in* abundance. This is the truth Jesus comes to share and it cannot be made known just by talking about it. He can communicate it and enable us to entrust ourselves to it, only by living it himself. This is why the gospel insists that ultimately the Wisdom of God is revealed by Jesus' death on a cross and the empty tomb. As Rowan Williams puts it, it's only by undergoing failure, rejection, death that Jesus can 'at last "say" what is to be said; as if the silence of his dying is the only rhetoric for his gospel'.²

And here's the difficult truth of discipleship. For us, to learn from him, to come to live with him from the same source, means undergoing the same dispossession, the same yielding, so to discover for ourselves that 'failure and loss do not mean final destruction or emptiness'. 'Meaning, promise, the future, the possibility of continuing to live in freedom and in the resource to love – all these are "held" in the being of God', Williams writes.³ This is the wisdom Jesus comes to teach; 'the message of the cross' which, as St Paul admits, looks to us like foolishness, but is in fact 'the power of God and the wisdom of God' (1 Cor. 1. 18, 24).

So what does this mean for our lives, here and now? Let me conclude with two things. The concept of the dark night can sound romantic, glamorous even. But the lived experience of it is anything but. Many things can lead us past the point where we can make sense of our lives on our old terms, past the illusion that we can sustain our goodness and meaning for ourselves. Sometimes prayer itself leads us into the darkness, as our old religious feeling dries up and becomes empty. We may undergo an erosion of faith, the slow collapse of hopes, the creeping despair of diminishing capacities and approaching mortality. Sometimes a dark night, a felt sense of impasse, loss, confusion and despair, is precipitated by grief or illness, by powerlessness in the face of injustice or by experiences of entrapment and dysfunction. Many of you, many of your loved ones, are undergoing such things. And there's a sense in which all of us are undergoing what some have called a global dark night as the environmental crisis

² Rowan Williams, 'Resurrection and Peace: More on New Testament Ethics', *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), p.270.

³ Williams, 'Resurrection and Peace', p.270.

confronts us with the catastrophic impacts of ways of knowing and being that, even now, we seem unable to give up or transform. In a dark night, there is suffering and there's no guarantee we'll come through it expanded, rather than diminished, destroyed.

And this leads me to the second thing. If we *are* to come through the night, if the experience of impasse, death, loss and emptiness is actually to lead us into a more truthful, compassionate, God-given way of being in the world, then what matters is how we live it. Carmelite theologian Constance Fitzgerald speaks of the necessity of yielding in the right way, responding *with full consciousness* of one's suffering ... yet daring to believe that new possibilities, beyond immediate vision, can be given. This doesn't mean denying the reality of grief and destruction, the waste of life. It doesn't mean suppressing lament, anguish and pain. But it does mean continuing to be open, as best we can, to the promise of God ... even when we don't feel it, when we don't and can't believe it, even when we lose what we hold most dear. And it means continuing to align our being and action, as best we can, in accordance with that promise – open-hearted, self-giving, compassionate, truthful.

This isn't easy in the middle of the night. Jesus himself didn't find it so. But the Wisdom he lives and dies to share is that there is 'an eternal presence, an agency and intelligence wholly committed to who we are and who we shall become',⁴ and that it is possible for us to live 'consistently, courageously' in its light and from its love, for the healing of the world.

Have you understood all this, Jesus asks his disciples? Have you understood?

⁴ Rowan Williams, *Being Disciples* (London: SPCK, 2016), p.34.

