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Wisdom as Relation (Matthew 11. 25-30)

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I'm the kind of person, you won't be surprised to hear, who's wrestled a fair bit with faith and doubt. How do we know whether God exists? What if all our God-talk is just false consolation – the way we protect ourselves against the terrors of chaos and meaninglessness? As for Jesus – and the Christian claim that he is the Son of God, the Word of God, the 'exact imprint of God's very being' (Hebrews 1.3) – well, what does that even mean? And why should I believe it?

To wrestle with these questions has always seemed to me a matter of integrity – intellectual, emotional, spiritual. Which is why I've tended to be driven nuts by people who seem to labour under no such difficulty or imperative. Good people who've grown up in church, who've never questioned the simple faith they were taught as children, and who – when (as a ministry student, for example) I mentioned one or two of my struggles – looked at me uncomprehending and with just a hint of pity or complacency, saying, 'well, I've just always believed'. I just accept it.

'I thank you, Father, that you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants'. Are these the people Jesus is talking about? Is this the kind of uncritical faith that Jesus commends as leading to true knowledge of God? Well, I don't think it's that simple – though, of course, I would say that, wouldn't I? But let's have a closer look!

Last week, we began exploring what it means to say that Jesus is the Word of God; that Jesus not only speaks for God (like a prophet), but is the active presence of God, the embodied communication of God's truth and being. We saw that when Jesus himself was asked about his identity, he pointed to his impact in the world. He invited his contemporaries to pay attention to what they heard and saw happening around him: the blind receiving their sight, the lame walking, the deaf hearing, the

dead being raised. Jesus describes his ministry in the language of messianic expectation, and the implication is that he's not just any old wonder-worker. He is what happens when the Creator comes into the midst of creation, when the very source of all life, healing and understanding enters directly into the material world. This implication is made explicit by Jesus' remark: 'wisdom is vindicated by her deeds' (Matthew 11.19). Here he characterises himself as Wisdom personified, Wisdom incarnate – where Wisdom is understood, as in earlier Scriptural texts, as one of the names for 'God's active and glorious presence (Sirach 24, Wisdom 7), or [as] a mirror of divine agency (Wisdom 7)'.¹ It's an extraordinary self-description.

But why should we take his word for it? How may we come to know for ourselves that he is true? That's the sceptical question being asked by the crowds and religious authorities, and this is the point in the text at which Jesus suddenly gives thanks to his Father, to 'the Lord of heaven and earth', that these things are hidden from the wise and intelligent, and are revealed to infants. So what is it about being 'wise and intelligent' that renders this knowledge unavailable? And what is it about being innocent, unformed, simple that makes you more receptive to revelation, to realisation? Is it just that God has a preference for the credulous? Or is there something here about how any human being, any human intelligence, becomes capable of deepened knowledge of the real? In reflecting on this question, I'm going to draw on Rowan Williams' brilliant recent discussion of the theology of knowledge developed by the 4th century writer Evagrius Ponticus. This might seem a slight detour, but bear with me – I think it's worth it!

One of the things Evagrius is interested in is how human knowing can go wrong or fail to connect with reality. He discerns two kinds of mistake. On the one hand, we can be in simple error about the world around us. We haven't paid attention, or we're ignorant of certain facts, or we lack perceptual or intellectual capacity. On the other hand, and much more dangerously, our thought can become

¹ Rowan Williams, 'The Embodied Logos: Reason, Knowledge and Relation' in *Looking East in Winter: Contemporary Thought and the Eastern Christian Tradition* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2021), p.79.

distorted by certain habits of mind and heart; habits, for example of anger or aggression or acquisitive desire. Thought affected by these defensive, aggressive, acquisitive habits tends to react to people and to things primarily in terms of what they can do for me or whether they threaten me. Evagrius calls this 'diabolical consciousness' because it reduces my perception of the world so that I 'see' only in terms of my own interests.² This, in turn, separates me from the whole, causes me to stand over against others and to forget I belong. It has disastrous consequences for my capacity to recognise, let alone respond appropriately, to the fullness of the reality of other subjects in the world.

Think, for example, of how the threatened and aggressive spirit of the conspiracy theorist renders them not simply in error about certain facts, but somehow mistaken, wrongly related to the world as a whole. Hence the significance for the intellect of contemplative practice; learning to be less driven by our fears and attachments, so as to enable more truthful vision and more realistic or rational action.³ As Williams puts it, real knowing involves a kind of hospitality – 'the readiness to give habitation' to what's there, in its 'sheer non-negotiable difference from the knowing self'.⁴ And we can take this one step further. The more hospitable our hearts and minds, then the more receptive we become, not just to the external form of things, but to what might be called their 'inner life'. We begin to perceive how each existent communicates the source of its being, and so is in some sense a word of God.⁵ On Evagrius's account, truer knowing necessarily involves seeing more wholistically, relationally, recognising the interconnectedness of the world as given, as we learn our own place and relationship with it all.

And this brings us back to Jesus and to what he means by saying that knowing him, knowing the Father is hidden from the wise and intelligent, and revealed to infants. Is he saying we must give up our critical capacities entirely? Or is it more that

² Williams, 'The Embodied Logos', p.66.

³ Williams, 'The Embodied Logos', p.67.

⁴ Williams, 'The Embodied Logos', p.73.

⁵ Williams, 'The Embodied Logos', pp.59-60.

he's concerned with how we exercise them – drawing attention to the difference between aggressive/acquisitive and hospitable/receptive approaches to knowing? For it seems to me true that if we want to know God – the really Real – then this *does* require being less attached to and arrogant about what we think we know already. It involves not deploying our cleverness to hedge against vulnerability, but the willingness to be, like an infant, in the condition of 'not knowing', the condition of a learner, simple, humble, open to and dependent on what is given. The remarkable thing is that Jesus has come to make it possible for us to entrust ourselves in this way.

In the biblical book of Sirach, a wise elder instructs the seeker of Wisdom, the seeker of God, how to proceed: 'Listen, my child', he says. 'Put your feet into Wisdom's fetters, and your neck into her collar. Bend your shoulders and carry her, and do not fret under her bonds. Come to her with all your soul, and keep her ways with all your might. Search out and seek, and she will become known to you; and when you get hold of her, do not let her go. For at last you will find the rest she gives and she will be changed into joy for you (Sirach 6. 23-28)'.

In what is surely a deliberate echo of this passage, Jesus once again puts himself in the place of Wisdom. For where Sirach's seeker is advised to put their feet into Wisdom's fetters and their neck into her collar, Jesus calls his hearers to 'take *my* yoke upon you, and learn from me'. But there's also a crucial difference. In Sirach, rest and joy are promised the seeker in the end, but the way seems hard. Wisdom's burden is heavy – 'Bend your shoulders and carry her'; her bonds chafe and her way is stringent. But to those who seek him, Jesus says, 'my yoke is easy, and my burden is light', for I am gentle and humble in heart.

Why does Jesus rework this passage from the Wisdom literature, this vision of what it means to seek God's truth, and in such a tender key? I wonder if it's because, as Wisdom incarnate, Jesus is not far from us. He shares our bodily life and the suffering of the world; he knows we're weary, already carrying heavy burdens. The wisdom he promises is not something beyond us we must work hard to obtain.

Rather, it's a living relationship with the love of God that liberates and lightens, that is already present among us to give us peace and draw us home, if only we will yield ourselves to it.

How do we know whether what Jesus says of himself is true? How do we encounter his reality so as to experience his gift and meaning? Well, we're never going to know it from a distance, from outside relationship, by means of external evaluation against pre-existing criteria. 'Come to me', Jesus says, 'and you will find rest for your souls' ... Come...