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The Gift of Limits (Matthew 5. 17-20)

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‘Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter’ – not one jot or tittle, in the old translation – ‘will pass from the law until all is accomplished’ (Matthew 5. 17-18). These words offer a particular challenge to those (like me) who are inclined to emphasise the boundary breaking, subversive, anti-legalistic dimensions of Jesus’ life and work. To those of us who like it when he says ‘the Sabbath is made for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath’? Who applaud his fraternising with those defined by the law as unclean, his refusal to join the sanctioned stoning of the woman caught in adultery and his willingness to go under the ‘curse of the law’, as St Paul puts it, (Galatians 3.13) so as to liberate us from its demands? In the light of today’s gospel reading, what are we to make of the bold proclamation in the Letter to the Ephesians that, ‘He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances’, transcending the law-defined division between Jew and Gentile to form one new humanity (Eph. 2.15)?

A proper engagement with these questions would involve far more time and space than we can devote to them here. But let me offer two remarks that I hope can orient us to some extent. Jesus’ defence of the law in Matthew’s gospel comes as part of his Sermon on the Mount. In this long teaching discourse, he’s depicted as the new Moses, handing down the essence of God’s law afresh. What follows the passage we just heard, however, is not a reiteration of detailed regulatory specifications concerning property, diet, the weaving of cloth and punishment for different categories of crime, such as may be found in the books of Exodus and Leviticus. It’s not even a reiteration of the Ten Commandments. Rather, what Jesus offers is a profound intensification of the *spirit* of the Law of Israel.

‘You have heard it was said in ancient times ... “Whoever murders shall be liable to judgement”. But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement’ (5.21-22). In the same way, Jesus addresses the lust that leads to adultery, the vengefulness that leads to retaliation and the self-justification that falsifies speech. It’s as if Jesus seeks to get at the root causes of human lawlessness, human destruction and betrayal. Anger, lust, revenge, self-justification; these underlie the outward behaviours condemned by the law, so deal with these Jesus says. ‘Let your righteousness exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees’. Let your righteousness be founded not primarily in keeping the rules but in the transformation of your heart.

And this leads to my second, orienting point. Jesus does appear to have sat lightly to particular legal injunctions – concerning Sabbath observance, concerning purity codes. But he never preached a systematic ‘disregard for the Torah as such’.¹ Indeed, his primary concern was with people’s relationship to the Law as a whole. Rowan Williams notes that ‘law was given to Israel as a gift, as the possibility of a pattern of behaviour honouring God in every detail of individual and corporate life’. But this gift becomes problematic when its enforcers lose sight of what the gift is in service of, and behave as if scrupulous observance of the rules were an end in itself. As the prophets of Israel also knew, not only does this tend to merciless application of minor details (tithing mint and dill while neglecting the weightier matters of justice and mercy). For those who are legally successful it leads also to a sense of entitlement, ‘of “claim” upon God’s favour’,² as if they’ve ‘earned their reward’ (Matthew 6. 2). But Jesus insists that God’s Law was not given to Israel to enable the achievement of self-congratulatory goodness for the morally lucky; it was offered as a means of enabling life for all, of creating necessary conditions for the sustaining and fulfilment of God’s good purpose for the world.

¹ Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St John of the Cross* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1991), p.17.

² Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge*, p.16.

And this brings us, finally, the Season of Creation and our theme this year: 'Let Justice and Peace Flow'. Over the last few weeks, we've spoken of the interdependence of ecological and social justice. We've been wondering what enables and what blocks the flowing of justice and peace for the earth and her peoples, and what that suggests for our own ways of being in the world. We've looked at issues of wealth and possession, of belonging and connection. Today I want to raise the question of law or limit; in particular, the gift of limits.

On the biblical account, the establishment of certain limits is the condition of manifold life. Creation begins with God's choice to be self-limiting. In the Hebrew imagination, God does not will to be everything, to fill the whole space, but wills that what is not God should come to be. The necessity and gift of limits is then explicitly celebrated in the myth of creation in Genesis 1. On this account, life only becomes possible when certain limits are set; when the light is separated from the darkness, when the waters are separated and pushed back so as to allow for the sky and dry land to emerge. The terror of the Flood story, when God is imagined to desire earth's de-creation on account of the violence of her inhabitants, consists precisely in the collapse of these limits – so that the waters once again cover the face of the earth, for says God, 'every living thing that I have made I will blot out from the ground' (Gen.7.4). In the biblical imagination, the transgression of proper boundaries always unleashes chaos in both the moral and natural worlds. Hence, when God calls a people into a form of human community that's supposed to reflect God's voluntarily self-limiting and life-generating being, almost the first thing God does is to give the law. Limits create space for life, relationship, goodness to happen.

Significantly, this isn't just about establishing security and stability. Limits are also what generate the possibility of charge, energy, invention. Once God has established basic spaces in the story of creation, God invites the space to start generating life out of its own limited nature. 'Let the earth put forth vegetation', God says: plants and fruit trees, living creatures of every kind, cattle and creeping things and wild animals of every kind. Let the waters bring forth different swarms of living

creatures. And so on. And isn't this generative potential of limits something we know for ourselves? Think of how the limit of a deadline can generate the energy necessary to produce a piece of work; how a bounded form in art – rules pertaining to sonnets, concerti or icons – evoke an astonishingly diverse and seemingly infinite creativity. Limits are about both safety *and* charge. Transgressing proper limits means the collapse of form into formlessness, and the loss of potency and potential.

And yet, what about improper limits? Limits that are arbitrary or unjust, diversity and creativity suppressed by the limits of prejudice, legalism, oppression or tragic circumstance. It's true that unjust limitations can sometimes provoke amazingly creative responses, like writing that emerges from the gulag, soul music rising from slaves in the American south. But that doesn't alter the injustice of certain limits, or mean we accept them as simply given by the nature of things.

So how do we discern the limits we encounter and the response proper to them? When is the limit of human vulnerability, mortality and custom to be pushed, expanded, resisted? And when must we learn how to live peaceably and creatively *within* limits, working with the grain of an ultimately bounded reality?

There's no doubt that questioning seemingly fixed moral and natural limits has allowed for extraordinary expansion of human capacity and possibility. Think of advances in medicine, communication, transport and agriculture. Think of the profound shift in how we relate to gender and sexual identity – limits that once seemed fixed 'by nature' but are now discerned by many to have been merely customary. But there are other contexts where the transgression or disregard of limits closes life down, rather than opening it up. Williams writes: 'The limits of our creative manipulation of what is put before us in our environment are not instantly self-evident', but 'what is coming into focus is the level of risk involved ... if we collude with a social and economic order that ... takes the possibility of unlimited advance in material prosperity for granted'.³ Indeed, he goes on, 'there is no

³ Rowan Williams, 'Renewing the Face of the Earth' in *Faith in the Public Square* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), pp.185-195, p.189.

guarantee that the world we live in will “tolerate” us indefinitely if we prove ourselves unable to live within its constraints’.⁴

Many have pointed to the urgency of rediscovering limits on human behaviour proper to a finite world whose material processes we do not control nor fully understand. There are some wonderful models of what this could look like. One emerges from economist Kate Raworth’s depiction of a ‘safe and just space for humanity’ in the doughnut shaped circle between an ecological ceiling and a social floor. Above the ceiling, we move into critical planetary degradation; below the floor, peoples fall into critical human deprivation.⁵ But within these limits, abundant life and an economic system that supports an interconnected whole is possible. Approaching the question in a different way, Tyson Yunkaporta identifies four protocols for living as ‘agents of sustainability in a complex system’. They are: diversify, connect, interact and adapt – all practices founded on a basis of humility and respect, enshrined in indigenous law and lore.⁶ ‘Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets’, Jesus said. ‘I have come not to abolish but to fulfil’.

When does law become freedom? When is limit a gift? These are questions posed with new urgency by the wounds of our fragile, interdependent world. May we learn to honour the gift of those limits that create and sustain us all.

⁴ Williams, ‘Renewing the Face of the Earth’, p.190.

⁵ Kate Raworth, *Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think Like a 21st-Century Economist* (London: Random House, 2017), p.11.

⁶ Tyson Yunkaporta, *Sand Talk: How Indigenous Thinking Can Save the World* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2019), pp.98-101.