

Hidden Figures (Matthew 5. 1-12)

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This is from the first letter of John. ‘Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this; when he is revealed we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure’ (1 John 3. 2-3). This is one of my favourite bits of the New Testament, and to me it speaks deeply of the contemplative vocation and the Christian vision of sanctity or saintliness.

In my mind, I pair it with a passage from Paul’s letter to the Colossians, which is also a favourite: ‘Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory’ (Col. 3.2-4). Now I recognise you may be thinking – what is she on about? Or even, *what is she on??* So let me try to share something of what matters to me in these verses, and how I think they illuminate our way!

A key theme is hiddenness. Those in the process of growing spiritually are said to become, in some sense, inaccessible to themselves, unable to see or evaluate themselves directly. ‘Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed’. And, ‘you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed’. It’s as if far from self-consciously ‘finding’ ourselves or knowing ourselves, spiritual maturation is going to make us more obscure to ourselves, less able to be sure of our meaning and significance. But can this be right?

One of the best commentators on this theme I’ve come across is Thomas Merton. He writes: ‘In order to become myself, I must cease to be what I always thought I wanted to be, and in order to find myself I must go out of myself, and in

order to live I have to die'.¹ At one level, this is familiar spiritual territory. If I want to know God and realise who I really am in God, I must move beyond ego-centricity and self-assertion. 'I must cease to be what I always thought I wanted to be'. I must give up the attempt to make myself someone by grasping at possessions, success, people and significance. I must learn increasingly to source my identity, my life, in God who wants to live in me. And this is about listening, obedience, attention to Another. So far, so good (at least in theory).

But, let's say we begin – slowly, gradually, in fits and starts, to move beyond obvious ego-centricity. There comes then a subtler stage in the journey. Merton writes powerfully of what he calls 'the disease which is spiritual pride ... the peculiar unreality that gets into the hearts of saints and eats their sanctity away before it is mature'.² Merton was aware of his own acute vulnerability to this disease, and there is, he says, 'something of this worm in the hearts of all religious [people]'.

We spiritual types are genuinely sincere about wanting to align our will and action with the goodness of God. We seek to deal with that in ourselves which gets in the way and, generously, we may expend ourselves in service and practice the necessary disciplines. Yet still, how easy it is to become (almost despite ourselves) rather satisfied with our progress; how tempting to compare ourselves favourably with others. 'Who can do good things', Merton asks, 'without seeking to taste in them some sweet distinction from the common run of sinners in this world?'³ How often do we see in religious communities, and sense in ourselves, that little hint of complacency: 'Lord, I thank you that I am not like other people'.

Or for some of us perhaps, it's the opposite. The same habit of comparing ourselves to others can lead us constantly to think less of ourselves, to worry compulsively if we're doing it right, to feel inadequate and as if we don't really belong. Either way, the danger is essentially the same. Yet it's subtle and so must be

¹ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, reissued with introduction by Sue Monk Kidd (New York: A New Directions Book, 2007), p.47.

² Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p.48.

³ Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p.49.

our response. We don't want to end up so hyper-scrupulous and self-deprecating that we can't participate in and enjoy the good we're part of; nor do we want to obsess endlessly about our real motives or our unworthiness which is just another way of keeping ourselves at the centre.

And this, I think, is what the language of hiddenness is about. At the deepest level, we are not in charge of our growth in God and we're not encouraged self-consciously to evaluate how far we think we've come (or not). 'Be content that you are not yet a saint', Merton writes, 'even though you realize that the only thing worth living for is sanctity. Then you will be satisfied to let God lead you to sanctity by paths that you cannot understand. You will travel in darkness in which you will no longer be concerned with yourself and no longer compare yourself with others'.⁴ And here's the joyful paradox. 'Those who have gone by that [hidden] way have finally found out that sanctity is in everything and that God is all around them'.⁵ When we authentically forget ourselves, when we abandon rivalry and our striving to achieve holiness, we 'suddenly wake up and find that the joy of God is everywhere'. We become able to perceive and make visible the light of God shining in others, even in those who seem to be most unredeemed. For, as it's often been said, the true saint is someone who draws attention not to their own virtue but who causes you to see yourself and everyone else in the light of compassion and mercy.

So how do we learn to forget ourselves? How do we consent to and allow God's hidden and transfiguring action to work within us? It seems to me that in the Beatitudes, Jesus gives his answer. Here he names the dispositions of self that take us beyond our own effort and simply expose us to the light.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God (Matthew 5. 8). Purity of heart isn't about having only holy thoughts, and suppressing the naughty ones. It's about the desire to open ourselves to God without conditions and without reserve, not hedging our bets or dividing our loyalties. In his discussion of purity of heart,

⁴ Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, pp.59-60.

⁵ Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p.60.

Rowan Williams refers to the story of Martha and Mary. ‘Mary sees that *one thing* is necessary and directs her desire to that’. Although there’s a long tradition of interpreting this story as elevating contemplation over action, Williams thinks it’s more to do with whole-heartedness, this fundamental disposition of the self towards God. It’s ‘a story about integrity and fragmentation – wanting one thing, [as opposed to] wanting all kinds of things’.⁶

And he goes on: ‘Purity of heart involves and includes poverty’. Partly this is about being dispossessed of what’s not God, letting go extraneous ambitions and distractions. And partly, I think, poverty of spirit is the felt experience of realising that I cannot make happen the ‘one thing necessary’. I cannot try any harder or make myself good or whole out of my own resources. It’s the realisation that I am wholly dependent on gift, on grace. Mostly I don’t get to this place except by way of failure and loss; often exhausted and deeply sad. So poverty of spirit involves an allowing of grief and the compassionate recognition of loss, frustration and tragedy in my own life and the lives of others. This, in turn, is intimately connected with humility, touching into the real ground of our being. ‘Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth’. And from this ground emerges mourning and mercy. Says Williams: ‘Sensitivity to the depth and presence of others in their vulnerability rules out the bitter and harsh struggle for power in which others are made to pay the price of our fears and insecurities’.⁷ There is born a passion for justice and ‘so peace is made’.

We misunderstand the Beatitudes if we see them first as a set of moral injunctions – and blessed are we who successfully achieve them. In fact, what they describe is more failure than success, dispositions of self which accept that we are intrinsically and necessarily incomplete. They connect us to the truth of our fragility and vulnerability, and it’s this which grounds us in the endlessly giving life of God. And on this account, the truly blessed, the saints of God, aren’t people who deploy an achieved and self-possessed righteousness to do good in the world. They’re those

⁶ Rowan Williams, *The Truce of God: Peacemaking in Troubled Times* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2005), p.91.

⁷ Williams, *The Truce of God*, p.92.

who live by daily entrustment to grace and self-forgetful responsiveness to this larger life.

We all know how we struggle to live consistently from this space of self-forgetful, self-yielding trust; yet, in conflicts ranging from the domestic to the international, we see the horrifying consequences of our human failure to mature in love so as to be capable of true justice, solidarity, mercy and peace. At the Feast of All Saints, we remember our human calling to be holy as God is holy. We give ourselves anew to depend on and slowly incarnate the same grace that Jesus depended upon and incarnated. And so we join with all those hidden figures who, unknown wholly even to themselves, participate in the vast web of goodness that undergirds all things, and that will be in the end revealed as the truth and meaning of our lives.