

Talk Two – March 20th 2019

People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them. (Mark 10:13-16)

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This evening I want to reflect on two gaps. The first, is a gap *in* ourselves. The second is a gap *between* ourselves. The first is a turning away from God; the second is a turning towards our neighbour.

Last week I suggested we reclaim the title “God of the gaps”, that gaps are necessary or valuable, as God is necessary and infinitely valuable. And yet, here we are confronting a gap I’ve characterised as a turning away from God.

Even this gap – between who we *are* and who God calls us to *be* – is a blessing. A gift, because recognising the gap challenges us, turns us around, and embarks us on a journey.

Jesus describes himself as the Way. He does *not* describe himself as the destination. And the Way presupposes a distance to be travelled, a journey to be made. Last week we encountered the theology of Gregory of Nyssa, the theologian writing in fourth century Cappadocia. We took from Gregory the idea that we can never grasp the essence of things, that our knowledge is always gappy, conjectural, imaginative, a knowledge-towards, as he puts it.

Now I want to reflect on Gregory’s understanding of our journeys towards God. In his commentary on the *Song of Songs*, Gregory says:

It is our duty, “always to rise up, drawing nearer and nearer along the way, and never ceasing.”¹

We can never reach our destination. The gap between us and the God to whom we are drawn is infinite – this is a journey without an end. But we are on the way nonetheless; we are wayfarers.

It might seem odd, or counterintuitive, but I want to begin our infinite journey this evening, by going backwards.

What do the children in that passage from Mark have that we need to relearn and adopt in order to receive the kingdom of God? What is the gap that has opened up between us *now* and the children we were *then*?

Are we being a teensy-weensy bit Victorian if we characterise the children as cherubs, innocent lambs, sinless, sweet and gentle? I don't know any children like that. No, I think the important thing about the children in that passage is – they are marginalised, not allowed into the centre of things to meet their Saviour.

I remember taking my son to a Christmas carol service in a cathedral when he was just a few months old. When he woke during the service and became restless I carried him around the aisles to look at the beautiful stained glass, the statues and the candles. On the way out of the cathedral after the service a woman turned to me and asked, “Do you really think it's appropriate to bring a baby to a service like this?” I was so shocked – what had we just been singing about, what passages had we just been listening to from the gospel? A weak and helpless baby is at the centre of our faith.

Let the little children come to me.

Jesus' letting the little children come to him is not just an example of how He urges us to question or turn aside from the rigidity of learned rules and expectations and traditions. As

¹ αἰεὶ τε γὰρ ἐγείρεσθαι χρὴ καὶ μηδέποτε διὰ τοῦ δρόμου προσεγγίζοντας παύσασθαι. Gregory of Nyssa, in *Cantica Canticorum Homilia* v. (PG 44:876C).

so often with Jesus' teaching – it's not a "don't," but a "do," "a do this." Reach out to the marginalised, the ones for whom this service is not appropriate.

Jesus' response to the disciples is not only a critique of hidebound adult mores, but a *positive* call for us to change. To repent. Literally to turn about, to be converted. Don't change the rules, don't change your behaviour – change who you are. This isn't a passage about children; it's about us.

So, rather than thinking about what we *lose* when we become like children – all the freedoms and responsibilities of adulthood and so on, it's worth asking what we *gain*.

For an answer, I suggest we could do worse than look at another *Way*. The Tao. Tao in Classical Chinese means the Way. The *Tao Te Ching* is a short text, probably written around the sixth century BC – but which had an enormous influence on the development of Confucianism and Buddhism. I'm not going to quote from the Tao directly but from a modern interpretation of it. The following quote comes from a film called *Stalker*. In my view, one of the most brilliant and beautiful films ever made. Directed by Andrei Tarkovsky in the late 1970s in the USSR, *Stalker* is a film about a journey, a journey of faith into a mysterious and abandoned Zone. The plot goes like this: three men embark on a journey to find the answer to all their dreams. They don't find it. They come home. The end. But it is – for my money – the greatest modern meditation on faith around.

The guide on this journey, the eponymous Stalker, a wayfarer, explains what travellers along the way need to remember:

Let them be helpless like children, because weakness is a great thing, and strength is nothing.

When a man is just born he is weak and flexible. When he dies he is hard and insensitive.

When a tree is growing, it is tender and pliant, but when it's dry and hard, it dies. Hardness

and strength are death's companions. Pliancy and weakness are expressions of the freshness of being.²

Pliancy and weakness. The radical idea that weakness – the weakness of children – is a great thing reminds us – not just of the Tao, but of God's words to Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians:

My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. (2 Cor 12:9)

To change, to become weak, vulnerable, flexible is deeply countercultural – as countercultural now as it was in first century Palestine. We naturally don't like to be exposed, defenceless, weak. We move to protect ourselves. We're encouraged – as I said last week – to stand up for ourselves, to be strong, to be self-reliant, hard, qualified, professional.

We talked too – in our questions – about loss of innocence. About how the story of the Fall of man is partly a story *about* loss of innocence. And an attempt to find strength in knowledge. But the new-found strength and knowledge comes at a cost:

Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves. (Gen 3:7)

These fig leaves are our constructed identities, the masks we hide *behind* and live *through*.

But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, 'Where are you?' He said, 'I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.' (Gen 3:9-10)

It often goes unrecognised, or ignored, or brushed over – that sometimes our first and overriding experience of encountering God is: our own unworthiness.

This is a testimony of a religious experience from William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*.

² *Stalker*, directed by Andrei Tarkovsky (1979; London: Curzon Artificial Eye, 2002) DVD

At first I began to feel my heart beat very quick all on a sudden, which made me at first think that perhaps something is going to ail me, though I was not alarmed, for I felt no pain. My heart increased in its beating, which soon convinced me that it was the Holy Spirit from the effect it had on me. I began to feel exceedingly happy and humble, and such a sense of unworthiness as I never felt before.³

Happiness, humility and unworthiness. A curious – even contradictory – combination to our ears. To feel unworthy is to feel unhappy, surely? Our happiness is at least partly conditional on our sense of worth.

Perhaps. But it's not just that we don't *like* to feel unworthy, it's that we think we *shouldn't* feel unworthy. It's wrong to feel unworthy. So much so, that mention of feelings of lack of worth are liable to get you diagnosed and put on a course of anti-depressants. We have pathologized feelings of unworthiness. To feel unworthy is to be unwell.

But what that testimony from William James suggests is that our sense of our self-worth is *of the world*. Across the gap – from God's point of view – it is nothing. Nothing but a mask, a protective fig leaf, a fiction. What if our sense of unworthiness before God were not a pathology, but a perfection? A perfecting of ourselves in weakness. The weakness and helplessness that belongs to children.

What if recognising the gap between our sophisticated adult selves and the vulnerable children we were – is the first step on a journey to wellness, to the Kingdom of God?

What if – letting go of and losing these self-constructed, and socially mandated identities, these fig leaves, is actually gaining freedom? Because it frees us from prisons we've built for ourselves and which we don't even recognise. Prisons we've grown so accustomed to we take them for goods. Like the prison of *self*-reliance – I can look after

³ William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, (New York: Penguin, 1985), 191

myself; or the prison that is the desperately lonely, Victorian idea of *self-help*; the relentless and unforgiving sentence of *self-motivation*.

We think that by making ourselves knowledgeable, showing the world we're strong and *right*, and worthy of respect – then we are equipped to deal with life, aren't we?

I want to think about statues for a moment. In the third century, the philosopher Plotinus had this to say:

Withdraw into yourself and look. And if you do not find yourself beautiful yet, act as the creator of a statue that is to be made beautiful: he cuts away here, he smooths there, he makes this line lighter, this other purer, until lovely face has grown upon his work. So do you also: cut away all that's excessive, straighten out all that's crooked, bring light to all that is overcast, labour to make all one glow of beauty and never cease chiselling your statue, until there shines out on your from it the godlike splendour of virtue.⁴

It's up to you to make yourself a better person, self-improvement. We're familiar with this idea. It's the sort of pop psychology peddled on *The Apprentice*. It's what we read in every self-help book we might pick up from the Mind, Body, Spirit section of every High Street bookshop.

But it is not how Christians are called to live and think. Let's look at another statue.

This is Brother Lawrence from *The Practice of the Presence of God*:

I consider myself as a stone before a carver, whereof he is to make a statue: presenting myself thus before God, I desire Him to make His perfect image in my soul, and render me entirely like Himself.⁵

It's not up to us at all. It's up to God's grace. We need to step out before God, as children, for whom – *it's true* – this service is *not* appropriate. Part of becoming a little

⁴ Plotinus, Ennead 1.6.9. *The Enneads*, translated by Stephen Mackenna (London: Penguin, 1991), 54

⁵ Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God* (London & Oxford: Mowbray, 1977), 33. See also 1 Peter 2:4-5: "Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."

child, is not to try to effect the change ourselves but to present ourselves faithfully, in trust, before God, for God to make the change in us.

Let's return to our opening passage from Mark. It's important to note, I think, that Jesus does *not* say "Become as little children in order to enter the kingdom of God." He says instead: "Unless you *receive* the Kingdom of God as little children, you will never enter it."

Before we can enter the Kingdom, we must *receive* it. As a gift. It's not something we can attain or win or earn by our strength; it's not something of which we can ever be worthy. It must be given us.

It's an odd gift though. Because, as Jesus says, it already belongs to those who receive it. "It is to such as these that the Kingdom of God belongs."

The idea of belonging points us to what we share, collectively. We share this gift. We have this gift in common. A mutual inheritance. Which brings us to the second gap I want to consider this evening.

Unlike the gap between our childhood selves and our adult selves which is psychological and social and cultural, this gap – between me and you – is metaphysical, and infinite.

You know that staple of romantic novels and films – the idea of love across the divide. She's a debutante, an uptown princess and he's from the wrong side of the tracks. I want to say that all relationships – not just romantic relationships – are like that. We're all loving across the tracks.

Let's borrow some horticultural imagery to help us here. I'm not a gardener so I don't really know what I'm talking about. But bear with me! Trees and roots. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari came up with a valuable distinction between two ways in which we model our relationships with one another, and with information, ways of modelling the complex world we live in. On the one hand they talk about *arborescent* or tree-like structures – hierarchies:

you have root feeding into trunk feeding into branches. It's vertical and linear and neatly structured. If you like, it's what we talked about last week as 'place.' We look for causes and chart their predictable progress into effects. Relationships according to this model are rule based, *like games*.

On the other hand, Deleuze and Guattari describe *rhizomatic* structures of thought and relations where complex horizontal clusters or webs or arrays of adventitious connections spread out in all different directions – a rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things. It is a journey that never ends. Relationships according to this model are unruly, *like play*.

How do we reach out into the gap between ourselves? Do we follow instructions for a game, for the building of structures out across the divide? Or do we daringly throw ourselves into play, the middle of things and see what happens, as Jesus did, as children do?

Emmanuel Levinas, a French-Lithuanian philosopher in the twentieth century came up with a radically alternative way of doing philosophy. He'd inherited a philosophical tradition that had the subject at its heart. I – me, the subject – experience the world as sense data. And I turn that raw experience into mental content, like a lone viewer sitting in a cinema at a private screening.

For Levinas, that's all egotistical rot. The subject, he thought and taught, is not as important as the relations *between* subjects. His philosophy is *face-to-face*, in other words. That rhizomatic relation between you and me – is of ultimate and irreducible importance. The face of the other that I'm confronting now and now and now cannot be bound or brokered by rules or conventions to do with race or gender or culture or anything arborescent and adult. Nor is it even symmetrical – or what we might call fair:

I am responsible for the other without waiting for reciprocity, even were I to die for the other.⁶

It's a philosophy that requires the gap. But which beautifully and movingly calls us out *into* the gap.

Jesus – perhaps particularly the Jesus portrayed in Mark's gospel – does not stand outside, sermonising and sympathising; he daringly, dangerously steps into the gaps of people's broken lives, and shares their pain, their suffering.

He is not sympathetic. God's being sympathetic is one of those assumptions made by atheists when they wonder how an all good God could allow evil and suffering in the world. If God were sympathetic, they say, God wouldn't allow us to suffer and so on.

But sympathy is – partly – an expression of human power and strength. It is arborescent. The sympathizer has power over the person for whom they feel sympathy. It's why differently-abled people, or those who are suffering don't want our pity. They don't always want our sympathy.

They want our compassion – our suffering with, our sharing, our stepping into the gap. At Lent – as we approach the events of Holy Week, perhaps we could reimagine Passiontide, not as commemorating events *that happened*, but as a *Compassiontide* – something we are called *to make happen*. Something to share with the world. Letting the story break free of the rules and boundaries and structures.

Jesus is not sympathetic, but empathetic. Sympathy emphasizes the gap. Empathy transforms the gap. Sympathy reveals how the gap divides us. Empathy reveals how we *share* the gap. The gap belongs to us as the Kingdom of God belongs to us – if we let ourselves receive it.

⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 98

And God, in the form of our Lord Jesus Christ, shows us how to live in the gap, how to make the gap between us, the space between us, a precondition of sharing, of gift, and of grace, of love flowing endlessly, generously, riskily out into our relationships, out into the world, putting love into the middle of things. As Cynthia Bourgeault (American theologian, priest and contemplative) puts it:

Anyone who is willing to take up the burden of the difficult task – not the manageable complexity of rules and regulations, but the unmanageable simplicity of being present to your life in love – that person is walking the way of Jesus.⁷

This short passage beautifully sums up both of the gaps we've considered this evening. The manageable complexity of rules and regulations is the adulthood to which we've grown accustomed and within whose structures we're expected to live. We know the rules of the game. It's familiar to us, and it is arborescent in its approach to the world – there are hierarchies and norms and it has power-relations coded into its functioning. But Bourgeault talks about 'the unmanageable simplicity of being present to your life in love.'

That is becoming as a child. Innocent, vulnerable (as all loving is vulnerable) and pliant. It is a rhizome – growing in the space between me and you. There is no beginning and end. I'm not in charge and nor are you. It's something we *share*. Like play. But it's not easy play. It's difficult. Whoever really, honestly remembers their childhood will know that it's not easy being a child, because you're sometimes kept on the outside – this service is not appropriate for you; childhood is to do with accepting, receiving. We cannot enter the kingdom of heaven until we have received it.

Giving and receiving presuppose a gap – require a gap. The gap is where God's grace moves: between us, through us, in us. Drawing us in all directions, that is: Godwards.

And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

⁷ Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Jesus: Transforming Heart and Mind – a New Perspective on Christ and His Message*, (Boston: Shambhala, 2008), 88

Prayer

God of the gaps,

we pray for the courage to break the rules and come before you – as we are,

so that you might carve us into the people you call us to be.

And for the grace to receive the gift of your kingdom,

as children – unworthy, humble, happy.

God of the gaps,

we pray for the courage to throw ourselves into the middle of things,

to enter the unmanageable simplicity of being present to our lives in love,

to see the truth of Passiontide revealed as a Compassiontide

for all the world.

Amen

Colin Heber-Percy

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