

The Abundance of the Heart (Luke 6: 39-45)

Epiphany 6

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Becoming a disciple of Jesus means being inducted into a whole new way of seeing and being in the world; it means learning to live out of a different relationship to reality. Chapter 6 of Luke's gospel sets out the key elements of this new vision and relationship – and it's worth reminding ourselves of what it looks like.

Jesus begins by overturning our usual conception of what it means to be blessed or to fare well. 'Blessed are you who are poor', he says. Blessed are you who are hungry now ... Blessed are you who weep now ... Blessed are you when people hate, exclude, revile and defame you on account of the Son of Man'. And conversely, 'Woe to you who are rich ... Woe to you who are full now ... Woe to you who are laughing now ... Woe to you when all speak well of you'. With this proclamation of blessings and woes, Jesus teaches that those who have now all they want – those who possess wealth, status, fame, who are untroubled by grief and on top of the pile – *they* are at odds with 'the kingdom of God', whereas those who might have been deemed pitiful, even cursed, are somehow closer to the heart of life.

Next he gives an instruction about how to relate to enemies, to those who curse and abuse you. The instruction is not to reciprocate in kind, not to allow what is done to you determine what you do back. 'If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt'. The disciple is not to repay evil with evil, but is actively to seek the good of her enemies, without condition: 'love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return'. Just as God is 'kind to the ungrateful and the wicked' so the disciple, Jesus teaches, is to 'be merciful' to all. And this involves not just external deeds, but inward attitude and responsiveness – 'do not judge ... do not condemn ... forgive' although, here, interestingly, a return of some sort can be anticipated. 'Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be

condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you' – 'for the measure you give will be the measure you get back'.

Well, it seems to me that the invitation to see and be in the world this way is both profoundly appealing and potentially seriously problematic. On the up side, it suggests the possibility of living with radical freedom and generosity because of who God is. Jesus is proclaiming that our standing with God has nothing to do with our success in the world. Blessedness is not about 'making it', being well thought of, escaping tragedy. Quite the opposite – it's the fruit of accepting our dependence, giving up the illusion of self-sufficiency. Blessed are you who are poor, rejected, sad – not because your suffering by itself is 'good', but because the more you know your need and vulnerability, the closer to God you draw. And the closer to God you draw, the less driven you have to be by what is done to you. Who and how we are need not be determined by how others behave towards us. Discipleship of Jesus means not having to be locked in relationships of tit for tat, of grudging reciprocity. We're invited to a share in the spaciousness of God's own life – being merciful as God is merciful, releasing the life in others and ourselves as we practise forgiveness, generosity and acceptance.

And yet, on the flip side, isn't there a danger in this peaceable, non-resisting, forgiving vision of life that we'll all end up as doormats, dumbly accepting whatever is done and whatever befalls? Blessed are the poor and the hungry, for in heaven they will be filled – which means no one really needs to address their condition on earth. How often has this saying helped perpetuate structural injustice? And what about the injunction to 'turn the other cheek'? How often has this been invoked to keep people (mostly women) locked in situations of domestic violence? And how often has the exhortation to forgive without condition silenced the victims of abuse and kept perpetrators (especially within the church) concealed? Rather than leading to the release of life in ourselves and others, these teachings can and have been used to maintain an unjust status quo, suppress the voices of the dispossessed and

protect the interests of the powerful. I suspect I'm not the only one to have thought that being Christian required me to maintain an overlay of 'niceness' as I let people walk all over and wipe their feet on me, while guiltily concealing my resentment.

And this is why the passage we just heard is absolutely crucial. Because, having outlined the key elements, the key practices, of this new and generous vision of life, Jesus insists that it can only be properly understood and rightly lived as we learn to participate in his way of seeing and being, the disciple becoming 'like the teacher'. This passage reminds us that Jesus is not just giving his disciples a new and counter-intuitive code of behaviour – something to be implemented through gritted teeth with lots of will-power. Rather, he's seeking to transform our whole consciousness, to communicate a whole new way of seeing ('first take the log out of your own eye'), a whole new way of relating to reality at the deepest level of our being – at the heart. Unless this transformation of vision and heart occurs, then no matter how slavishly we try to follow his instructions, how much willpower we exercise, we'll be like blind guides leading the blind, like bramble bushes trying very hard to produce grapes. We'll misunderstand what he's calling us to and be unable to live it anyway.

What's at stake here isn't so easy to describe, but you might think of what Jesus is doing in terms of changing the filter through which we see – as when we're watching a film, and the projectionist puts a filter in the projector. The same film is shown but its colouration is changed and so the whole feel of it, the possibilities of response.¹ So what's the filter that needs changing? It's the fact that so much of our awareness and habitual responsiveness is coloured by a sense of threatenedness, by fear, rivalry and scarcity. And the effects of this filter, this background sense of life, are profoundly limiting. Instead of simply resting in the limitless mercy of God, for example, we think we have to make ourselves good, justify ourselves and so be

¹ See James Alison, *Knowing Jesus* (Springfield, IL: Templegate Publishers 1994), pp.40-41.

better than others; instead of being able to cut each other some slack, we need to compete with them for being, we need to judge, condemn and insist on our 'rights'.

Jesus wants to liberate us from this self-limiting, threatened way of being. So, he says 'stop living out of that energy and reinforcing that background filter'. Do not repay evil for evil; do not withhold mercy; practice generosity even when it's not returned. It will feel weird at first, but the more you practice, the free-er you will feel. You'll find out that the less you judge, the less you'll experience yourself judged (the less you'll judge yourself); the more you forgive, the more you'll know yourself forgiven – for the measure you give will be the measure you get back. In Chapter 6 of Luke's gospel, Jesus is giving us practices that to help transform our way of seeing ourselves and each other, our whole way of relating to reality. These are practices that liberate us from having to compete for approval and belonging; that transform the heart, the basic energy we live from and give out.

But notice what this doesn't mean. It doesn't mean we have to put up with systematic abuse or roll over in the face of injustice – all the while seething inside. It's more that Jesus is sharing with us the possibility that our responses to life and one another, even in the most difficult and painful situations, can come from a larger, more spacious place. Abuse needs to be stopped; wrongs acknowledged and compensated. But instead of responding to injustice and abuse in a spirit of vengeance or payback, resentment or bitterness, we can learn to be towards even our enemies as God is – spacious, holding open the possibility of healing, making room for grace and renewed connection.

Of course, there are times this feels impossible. I've certainly had periods of my life where I've felt it impossible to forgive a wrong done to me, and had absolutely no desire to hold open space for the other. But the way forward here is not just to try harder, or to pretend to possess a 'goodness' that isn't there. After all, 'figs are not gathered from thorns'. Rather, the invitation in these difficult spaces is simply to acknowledge where we're stuck, entrusting ourselves to the mercy of God

and the slow process of our transformation by grace. It might take a very long time, it might take a life time, but gradually we realise that we just are seeing and being differently. We're no longer trying to forgive, but we have forgiven; we're no longer trying to love, but we simply love. Root and branch we are being transformed; and overflowing from the abundance of our heart is the goodness that is the gift of God.