

PREFACE TO THE NEW EDITION

I first started giving this course in the front room of some friends of mine in London in the late 1990s. I called it *The Forgiving Victim*. The title was my shortcut “way in” to describing the difference that Jesus makes to the world we know and inhabit. A world in which sacrificing others, marginalising and expelling them is standard practice for the way we humans gather together and create unity. It’s such a default, fallback position for any of us whenever anything goes wrong that we’re scarcely aware that we’re doing it. Often we’re only joining in because everybody does it anyhow. We depend on victims whom we don’t see, and whom we don’t want to see. And we can get quite annoyed when someone points out our complicity, our silence, or our involvement in such a thing. Then we start to feel that *we* are the victims and feel justified by that victimary sense in pointing the finger at others, who started it. It is into this, all too familiar, world that Jesus comes, occupying the place of shame, of expulsion, of death, voluntarily and deliberately to detoxify that space forever. Central to what he was about was getting us off being tied up in, involved in, this victimary world, whether as perpetrators, as victims or as is usual in the case of most of us, some mixture of the two depending on which bit of our life is under examination. And all of that was done freely, voluntarily, lovingly. It is the shape of God’s love.

For my London friends, the title was not shocking. I suppose because they knew I was trying to get them to sit for a time in a place where they could see that someone else, Jesus, was doing something for them. In any case, and being my friends, they also knew that, as a person of dubious morality myself, I had zero business telling them what to do or moralising at them. Instead, I wanted them to find themselves inside what Jesus had done and was doing and thus to find new and interesting ways of their own to be creative in their life responses, to work out what just living might look like, starting from where they were. However, as I began to be invited to give elements of the course, and then the whole course, in the United States, I stumbled into an unexpected

problem. For a significant number of those coming to hear me, the title “The Forgiving Victim” had toxic associations.

People assumed that I was going to be laying upon them the moral burden of turning into the sort of victim who forgives people. In some cases, their fear was grounded in having themselves undergone serious abuse. Very reasonably, they were nervous of anything that sounded like “Jesus wants you as a doormat” —battered-spouse syndrome, among other sorts of abuse, is far too frequently sanctified in this way.

In some cases, it was because they were beginning to deconstruct their earlier indoctrination in Penal Substitution Atonement Theory Evangelicalism (or equivalent sacrificial forms of traditionalist Catholicism), and were, again, rightly, terrified of the language of “victim” because of the violence of the associations it aroused.

Because of what I heard from these two groups, I changed my title to *Jesus the Forgiving Victim: Listening to the Unheard Voice*. This was my attempt to make clear from the get-go that it is Jesus, not they, who is the Forgiving Victim in question, and thus to get them to de-centre themselves from any immediate identification with the victim position. But also, to emphasise that first hearing and then listening to “the unheard voice”, the normally silenced voices of those who are victims, is the high road toward the risk of just living.

However, there was a further element to the reaction which seemed particularly strong among US listeners or participants. The sense that what they expected, and wanted, was that I should give them a message, if possible, clear, simple, and with practical steps to follow, which they would then go and put into practice. The problem is that what I am proposing is pretty much exactly the reverse of this. My inductive method is to make it easier for people to allow themselves the time to take on board what someone has done and is doing for them. For them to sink into it, begin to get a sense of it as something which brings them life. And only as they find themselves within it, to see what practical steps they might want to take. To discover the living out of justice as a creative, and not primarily a reactive, thing. For some, that is deeply counterintuitive.

So, when I received an invitation from Street Psalms to revise the course, update some of my images and allusions to things from the 90’s

and early 00's which few people would "get", and turn it into a single volume to be published by Aliosventos Ediciones, I also came face to face with the question of whether I could come up with a new and better title for the course. After all, my French publishers (Desclée De Brouwer) had decided that it was to be called "*12 leçons sur le christianisme*"—"12 lessons about Christianity"—not a bad title at all, and certainly not misleading labelling. But it does seem to run away from letting on much about the content.

While mulling over a title that would keep the elements of Jesus' detoxification of both victimhood and victimary sentiment, the element of an inductive path, and the sense of something being done for us, rather than our being told to do something, I remembered my favourite verse of the New Testament, Hebrews 12:2:

...looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken His seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

I love it because of the phrase "for the joy that was set before Him". As I understand it, it means that from the get-go, Jesus conceived of his whole project as something entirely joyful, suffused with joy in its carrying through, and achieved with a view to bringing so, so many into joy.

And of course, this is the apparent counterfactual that I long for us to relax into as we enter into His way.

So, I thought up a new title for the course: *For the Joy that Was Set Before Him...: A Course of Induction Into the Faith Pioneered by Jesus the ForgivingVictim*. Well, this captures what I want it to well enough. But, yes, you've got it: it's too long and is neither catchy nor memorable.

Which is why, despite my misgivings, the course still has the name: *Jesus the ForgivingVictim: Listening to the Unheard Voice*. Please let me know, as you go through it, if you can come up with an improved title!

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