

CHAPTER 12:

Neighbours and Insiders: What's It Like to Dwell in a Non-moralistic Commandment?

We have at least reached our final chapter, the one where I told you I would trespass onto the terrain of morality. You will agree, I hope, that up until now I have avoided not only morality, but even the appearance of morality. From the beginning, I have been trying to insist on something which every presenter of the Christian faith knows in principle, which is that Christianity is a religion of grace, not of laws or morals.

Unfortunately, presentations of the Christian faith often collapse back fairly quickly into pointing people towards a religion of laws, or morals: one in whose basic storyline God created everything good, humans fell, and then Jesus came to put that right. That's usually the moment when grace appears in the story. However, in some presentations, after Jesus has put everything right, all that is left for us to do is behave well according to a pre-existing code which we must just accept. After an initial conversion experience, such "grace" as we might encounter turns out to be some sort of power, enabling weak-willed individuals to stick to pre-established rules.

I hope it is by now obvious to you that a presentation of this sort is not helpful. An account of faith which postulates a mysterious event in the past leading to painful morals in the present reveals its distance from the original by making Christianity boring. That, above all, is the trap I've been trying to avoid. Instead, I have been attempting to set before you a rather different take on the same events: one in which a rambunctiously Alive One—the one I have described as "the other Other", effervescent beyond words—comes rushing towards us, taking us by surprise, undoing us from bonds we scarcely knew were there, and bringing us to life.

In this picture, the Alive One turns out to be drawing us into himself, opening us up to the realisation that where we were before was dangerously out of kilter. Now Creation—rather than being a boring “given” somewhere in the background—is something towards which we find ourselves being fascinatingly drawn by a “not yet” that is both given to and beyond us, rather than by something “already fixed” that is behind us. Our route from the “dangerously out of kilter” place of something constantly tending to close down, and towards the rich, fascinating, solid “not yet” that is opening up for us, passes through the breaking-open of our hearts. That breaking-open of our hearts, so as to make room for larger hearts, is the effect in our lives of the forgiveness of sins.

In this picture, it’s the new way of being which is coming upon us, which leads to a new way of behaving. And that is very much the approach to be found in the New Testament. In Paul’s letters, the approach is not “Do X, and then you will become Y”, but rather “Because you are finding yourselves X, so do Y”. So, for instance:

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on the things that are above, not on the things that are on Earth. For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you will also appear with him in glory. Put to death therefore what is earthly in you. (Colossians 3:1-5. Paul argues similarly in Romans 6:3-14)

The understanding is pretty clear: something happens that takes us somewhere quite new. As we find ourselves on the inside of the new life, allowing our imaginations to be re-jigged, so the ways of behaving which flow from that new life become second nature to us, and we are able to ditch those which don’t flow from it. What we are becoming comes first, and the transformation of our behaviour flows from that.

This makes sense to me: it is as I discover myself on the inside of a new way of being that I find out the meaning, and the richness, of different ways of behaving. Indeed, we find ourselves on the inside of discovering for ourselves quite why these new ways of behaving corre-

spond to our Creator's richest and deepest loving intentions for us. In other words, there is something genuinely exciting about learning to be fascinated by a goodness we didn't know.

And this, of course, has been the whole burden of this course: how it is that someone coming towards us, and into our midst, catches us by surprise and enables us to be turned into ... *ourselves-for-each-other*—something much richer and more zest-inspiring than we could guess while we thought we knew who we were. The very reverse of boring!

WWJD

To kickstart our look at the shape of good living which flows from the Christian faith, I'm going to be polemical with a little tag, which is often used as a quick guide to Christian morality. The tag "What Would Jesus Do?"

Many of you will have heard this before. In fact, there was a period when many people wore bangles or wristbands with "WWJD" inscribed on them, as a reminder of their moral compass. I've been told that, though these wristbands were very popular in the United States before the events of September 11th, 2001, their sales declined precipitously thereafter. Presumably, because it was pretty clear that blind revenge, pre-emptive warfare, legitimating torture, and lying about weapons of mass destruction were not What Jesus Would Do.

But, to the phrase itself: "What Would Jesus Do?" I think it has a certain positive value, as a moral guide, since its first demand is that you should remember stories. Any answer to "What would Jesus do?" is always going to take the questioner back to stories in which Jesus interacts with people: "Jesus would do what he did with the woman taken in adultery, or with the moneychangers in the Temple, or with his executioners. He would act according to the stories he told about the two people praying in the Temple, or the Good Samaritan, or the Prodigal Son". This, as I understand it, is the positive value of asking "What Would Jesus Do?": it pushes us into remembering stories, and into thinking our way into situations with the help of those stories.

However, I think there is also a less helpful element to the tag—an implicit presupposition. After all, the phrase, “What Would Jesus Do?” is only half a sentence. The unsaid second half is “If He Were Here”. In other words, the tag presupposes that Jesus isn’t here. And this means that the person who is saying “WWJD” is working out of a space something like this: “Look, I’m on my own, I’ve got to take responsibility for getting something right, and I’ve somehow got to work out what Jesus would do if he were here, which He isn’t, and then push myself into doing it”. I hope you can see that this takes us straight back to a world in which working at morals presumes absence and a straining of the will.

What we’ll be looking at, however, is what I would call a *presumption of presence* rather than a presumption of absence. From this perspective, the question is not “What Would Jesus Do?”, but “What is Jesus doing?” This is, of course, both a much more difficult and a much more interesting question to answer. For the answer to this second question—which might also be framed as “What is it like to live according to the Spirit which Jesus is breathing into us?”—requires us to be alive to all the things we’ve been looking at through all these chapters. Things like being approached by improbable people with foreign accents on strange roads who turn your story upside down; things like being forgiven, totally unexpectedly, by your victim, and therefore dragged into re-imagining your world as you find yourself being given to be someone you never thought you might become. As you can imagine, thinking through this second question—“What is Jesus doing?”—takes much more time and is not so easy to sort out quickly.

So, what is Jesus doing? By beginning with this presumption of presence, I’m going to explore how we learn to sink into, or develop, a habitual sensitivity to a certain form of imitation, to the being challenged by the mode of Jesus’ presence, which we saw in our Emmaus chapter. As I become acclimatised to this habitual sensitivity, I can learn to discern what Jesus is doing under my current circumstances. Just as he continues to give me his body, entrusting me to take it where I will and to make of it what I will, so can I give my body to Him, to carry on doing what He is doing. In doing this, I’m being drawn into a flexible imitation of Him. I’m not imitating him mechanically. Instead, I’m imitating him creatively: “Oh, yes, I can see that this is what he’s doing now, and I’m getting to be

on the inside of it. It's just like what he was doing in the past, but in very changed circumstances. The past serves as my reference point, as it were, a banister to hold onto, as I check that I am indeed on the inside of what he's doing now, being carried up into his project; that I am indeed, to use Jesus' own language, his friend, rather than his servant".

Luke's Testimony: The Lawyer's Question

To give you a clearer sense of what I'm talking about, we're going to look at the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). The context of the parable gives us a good frame:

Just then a lawyer stood up to put Jesus to the test. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

"Inheriting eternal life" is a more interesting phrase than simply another way of saying "What must I do to go to heaven?" Inheriting is what the ultimate insiders did (in those days, sons, but not daughters) and "eternal life" was a way of referring to the life of God. So St Luke frames the parable as a discussion of what it looks like to become an insider in the life of God.

First, the lawyer sets out his challenge: what sort of complex answer will Jesus come up with? In fact, Jesus remits the lawyer to something entirely non-esoteric, something entirely public and available to any listener:

He said to him, "What is written in the law? How do you read?"

Knowing perfectly well that the texts of the law can be made to say many things, Jesus asks the lawyer not only *what* the text says, but also *how he* interprets the law. (The Greek, followed by the majority of translations, gives, "How do you read?" The NRSV, idiosyncratically, gives, "What do you read there?")

The lawyer answers very properly, not by quoting a single text but by putting together two texts from two different books of the Torah. The first is from Deuteronomy 6:5:

...you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

The second is from Leviticus 19:18:

... you shall love your neighbour as yourself.

So the lawyer makes an act of legal interpretation, bringing together two laws in such a way that they interpret each other: what it looks like to be on the inside of the life of God is to be stretched towards God with every faculty of your being, and the form this takes is being stretched towards your neighbour.

Jesus commends the lawyer. He is not only a good lawyer, he has good moral sense as well, since he has made an act of interpretation which, while it was probably not innovative, is—in the different variants in which it has reached us—definitive: He has turned two different commandments into one single commandment which will never be abrogated. Henceforth, being on the inside of the life of God and being stretched lovingly towards my neighbour can never be separated. This is not merely a moralistic matter; it shows a firm anthropological insight: we are animals whose “selves” are brought into being through our relationships with others. We are reflexive. So how we treat our neighbours and how we treat ourselves are inescapably linked, and no amount of either apparent egoism or of fake altruism can do anything other than disguise this fact from us! Thus, indeed, our only access to finding ourselves loved is through our learning to love someone else.

And Jesus said to him, “You have answered rightly; do this, and you will live.”

The lawyer, however, wanted to take the matter further:

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbour?”

I wonder what Luke means when he says that the lawyer wanted to justify himself. It's a curious phrase, and the sentiment occurs several times in this Gospel, with the sense of a person who wants to make themselves good in their own eyes. Here, it is not clear whether the lawyer thought he was asking a difficult question and was expecting a more complex answer. Perhaps he was somewhat underwhelmed when Jesus, having drawn from him a fairly succinct answer to his own question, simply commended him. Imagine: you try to challenge someone with a potentially complex technical question and clearly, by your demeanour and style, expect a detailed answer which will flatter you for being intelligent, as well as expose possible weak flanks in your interlocutor's approach to things. Your interlocutor hears you out, and then, after a deep-looking pause, simply answers: "Yes, I agree". Well, it takes the wind out of your sails, and your colleagues giggle at you: the class clever-clogs who tried to catch the teacher out, but ended up firmly but gently put in your place.

Or maybe the point of the lawyer's original question—literally, "Doing what, will I inherit eternal life?"—was that he wanted an answer that gave him a specific "What's the legal minimum necessary?" In other words, when Luke says that the lawyer wanted to justify himself, maybe what the lawyer wanted was a more immediately applicable answer to his question—the sort of instruction that someone can "get right", fill in the right boxes, thereby becoming one of the good guys. If that's what he wanted, then an answer that sets out the overall framework but leaves a huge field for the hard work of interpretation and application to life situations would not meet his need.

In any case, the lawyer has a follow-up question, and it is by no means stupid. He is not merely asking Jesus to be more specific; he is asking a reasonable legal question about the interpretation of Leviticus 19, whence the second part of his own answer had been drawn. For the verse from which the lawyer had culled the phrase "and your neighbour as yourself" contains more than the part he had quoted. In full, it reads:

You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the LORD. (Leviticus 19:18)

Here, the word “neighbour” appears to refer to “the sons of your own people”—fellow Hebrews.

What makes the lawyer’s question legally interesting is not that the bit of Leviticus which he quotes has a circumscribed meaning, but precisely the reverse: a few verses later, in the same chapter of Leviticus, following on a number of commandments to do with intermingling cattle, sex with slaves, hair trimming, witchcraft, and respect for old age, we get the following:

When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God. (Leviticus 19:33-4)

So Leviticus appears to interpret itself, for the same phrase “You shall love him as yourself”, which was previously applied to the word “neighbour”, here acquires a new density: the stranger who sojourns among you is declared to be the exact legal equivalent of one of the “sons of your own people”, and therefore a neighbour in the strict sense of the commandment. In other words, the text of Leviticus seems to be heading in the direction of the term “neighbour” becoming universal, and that is legally worrying since, if everyone is your neighbour, then the term “neighbour” no longer has any precise legal meaning at all. How are you to know if you are obeying a commandment when it has no precise meaning?

It appears, then, that our lawyer is actually asking Jesus to interpret Leviticus, urging him to flesh out the relationship between being on the inside of the life of God, and the discussion concerning applicable forms of neighbourliness. And Jesus agrees to take the matter on:

And taking him up, Jesus said (...)

The Greek is interesting: of the possible words or phrases for “reply”, the one used is not the more contestatory, “in your face” sort of reply, but rather the kind that a legal authority would give who had

agreed to take on the matter. In other words, Jesus is not here showing the lawyer up. Rather, he's saying "OK, you're on. Let's see where we can take this". The parable that follows is his acceptance of the challenge simultaneously to show what it is like to be on the inside of the life of God, and to interpret Leviticus well in the matter of the neighbour.

Let us read it:

A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead.

So, here is the setting. The man is unspecified. It is not evident that he was a Hebrew, merely that he was a human. Whatever sort of human he was, he fell into the hands of people who did not discriminate between "sons of your people" and "sojourners in your land"—they were disobedient to Leviticus under any of its interpretations.

Their proximity to him was of entirely the wrong sort.

Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

I particularly like the word "by chance". It, too, forms part of the answer to the question. Nothing in Jesus' story is stable or ordered; everything is fluid and contingent. Whatever the teaching to be derived from this parable, it will have to do with navigating the fluxes not of what should be, but of what just happens.

The priest was, as it happens, going down the road. Interestingly, the road from Jerusalem to Jericho is downhill, so the priest was in fact going away from Jerusalem, and towards Jericho. In other words, he wasn't on his way to his Temple duties in Jerusalem. And the text doesn't tell us anything about the psychology of his motivation in passing by on the other side. It doesn't say that he was disgusted, or a coward, or in a hurry. Merely that he was a priest and that, seeing the wounded one, he passed by on the other side.

There were, in fact, perfectly respectable reasons for a priest to pass by. The man had been left half dead, and that means it would not be obvious, without going close to him and perhaps turning him over, whether he was dead or not. In any case, there was certainly blood all over the place, and if you were a priest, you had pressing professional reasons to avoid being close to a corpse or to spilt blood. In fact, central to the whole holiness code and the life of the Holy of Holies in the Temple was that it was a place utterly removed from death. The priests, whose ordination included the notion of a “resurrection” by which they became sharers in angelic life, must have nothing to do with corpses and their corruption, or blood other than that of sacrificial beasts. Indeed, a priest’s ability to serve God in the Holy Place would have been severely impaired by such contact, and he would have to undergo a complicated series of ablutions if he had touched an unclean thing. (All this is set out in Leviticus 21 and 22, not at all far from our passage).

So the Priest—and similarly, but to a lesser extent, the Levite—both had quite solid motives for giving a wide berth to the potential corpse by the side of the road. The potential corpse either might, or definitely would, impede their service of God. In fact, it was an obstacle to being on the inside of the life of God as enacted liturgically in the Holy Place. You can imagine them, maybe without any personal sense of disgust or fear of corpses, or any psychological issues to do with hygiene and contagion, thinking entirely in good conscience “I do hope someone else comes by soon to attend to the poor fellow, if it isn’t already too late for him. In fact, if the mobile phone had been invented, I would call a non-priestly friend for backup. However, my role in life is clear: it is to serve God in his Holy Place, and share in his life by my anointed service, and I shouldn’t let this accident, this unfortunate happenstance, upset the true order of the world—the unruffled stability in which the Almighty rejoices, and which it is my job to help promote. So, I’d better pass by on the other side”.

Then, along comes the Samaritan:

But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity.

Now, the interesting thing about the Samaritan is that he is not, from the perspective of the Jewish lawyer, the totally outside “other”—a complete foreigner. He occupies the much more infuriating place of being exactly the wrong sort of other: the one who is sufficiently like us to get us all riled up—a classic trigger for the reaction produced by the narcissism of minor differences. The Samaritans, after all, worshipped the same God, with a slightly different but overlapping set of Scriptures. They didn’t acknowledge Jerusalem as a sacred centre, worshipping instead on Mount Gerizim. So Jews and Samaritans were a perpetual reproach to each other, sources of reciprocal moral infuriation.

Please notice what Jesus is doing here. As part of his picture of what it is like to be on the inside of the life of God, he is nudging his listeners into being stretched out of their comfort zone, into traversing their own hostility by having to look at the situation through suspect eyes. In other words, built into his story is the same perspective we saw in our reading of the Road to Emmaus: the one who will turn out to be the bearer of what is true is the one who seems, to us, like the sort of person who “wouldn’t get it” since they’re “not one of us”.

Moving along, then, the Samaritan immediately draws near the half-dead man. We get the parable’s bombshell word: ἐσπλαγχνίσθη, which our translation gives as “was moved with pity”. In fact, the word is much stronger than that: it means “viscerally moved”, and so is much more like our English, “gut-wrenched”. This is the Greek form of the Hebrew word by which God was also described as viscerally moved, moved in the entrails or the womb.

In other words, right there, in the midst of this happenstance, what it looks like to be on the inside of the life of God has burst forth. And what it looks like is an entirely different relation to a potential or actual corpse than might have been expected. The priest, who had kept himself pure for sacrifice, might well find himself in the Temple alongside the corpse of an animal he had just sacrificed. He might even, depending on which feast it was, find himself having to eat the entrails of the animal in question. For it was the entrails that were known as “the portion of the Lord”; by eating them, the priest would be taking part in the life of God. Yet here the entrails, the life of God, burst forth towards

the utterly vulnerable victim by the side of the road, in the flesh of the Samaritan who is moved towards him:

He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him.

So, first of all, he moves close to him, instead of away from him. Then, using oil to soothe the wounded flesh, and wine, which was the basic disinfectant of the period, he bandages the half-dead one and brings him to an inn. Once he gets to the inn, please notice what he doesn't do: neither he nor the text make any reference to the ethnicity of the wounded one. He doesn't say to the innkeeper: "Look, I found one of yours on the side of the road, and have done far more than my bit by bringing him here, but now he's your responsibility"—something a foreigner might easily say to a co-national of the wounded one.

On the contrary, even being with him in the inn, the Samaritan doesn't pass the buck but continues to take care of him:

The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.'

Come the next day, and the Samaritan still doesn't distance himself from the wounded one. Even when he is going to be physically distant about his business, he leaves a generous first instalment with the innkeeper—two days' wages—and pledges himself to make good on an open-ended debt, for who can foresee the time necessary for healing and the possible expenses incurred as the result of wounds sustained?

In fact, the Samaritan becomes an indefinitely extended source of invisible succour for the wounded one, working through the local ministrations of the innkeeper. Jesus then addresses the lawyer:

Which of these three, do you think, was neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?

Even here, his phrasing is most suggestive. The lawyer had asked him “Who is my neighbour?” with the implication that the term “neighbour” referred to the passive object of mandated benevolence: “If we can define who my neighbour is, then I will know towards whom I am obligated to behave in a neighbourly way”. But Jesus has it the other way round: the word neighbour refers not to the passive object of benevolence, mandated or not, but to the active creator of neighbourliness—a further hint that he is answering the question “What is it like to be on the inside of the life of God?”

The lawyer answers Jesus very exactly, and without any reference to the ethnic issues involved:

He said, “The one who showed him mercy.”

Please notice, however, that in order to give that very exact answer, the lawyer has had to be dragged through all the discomfort of learning to discover real goodness through the viewpoint of someone who was, in principle, highly suspect. He has had to traverse his own hostility and repugnance in order to have clarity:

Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

In other words: if you want to inherit the life of God, there is no safely circumscribed definition of who your neighbour is. Instead, you will find yourself swept up into the inside of an infinitely attentive creation of neighbourliness amidst all the victimary contingencies of human life. And that attentiveness will be refined as you learn to avoid being seduced by sacrificial forms of religious goodness and as you overcome your own formation in the resulting culture of hostility.

Luke’s Testimony: The Samaritan’s Learning Curve

Having looked at the parable from the lawyer’s point of view, now we are going to explore it from the perspective of the Samaritan. It was, after all, he who was finding himself on the inside of the life of God. What did it look like for him?

One of the things the parable takes for granted in the midst of contingency is the centrality of victims. Victims appear in two valences in our story: sacred victims—the sort to be found in temples, and which inspire certain attitudes towards blood and corpses—and contingent victims, who are to be found in the midst of violent human interactions. We might, following the passage from Hosea at which we looked in our eighth chapter (Hosea 6:6), call the human attitude towards the first sort “sacrifice”, and the human attitude towards the second sort “mercy”. Concentrating our attention on the first sort of victim leads to a certain habitual blindness towards the second sort, while attention to the second sort leads to a particular kind of insight concerning the first sort. Those involved in both valences—the priest and Levite on the one hand, and the Samaritan on the other—are drawn by a pattern of desire which is intimately involved with a victim.

So here is the first hint of the shape of being on the inside of the life of God, what it’s like to become sensitive to where Jesus is and what he’s doing now: there is something ineluctable at its centre. The human pattern of desire is such that we either create goodness by displacing victims or find ourselves being made good by moving towards them. But a form of goodness which is entirely unrelated to dealing with the human reality of victimhood is not something available to our species. So much is this so that René Girard, with whose understanding of desire we have been working throughout this course, wondered what it was that first led proto-humans to discover the distinctions between “good” and “bad”, “in” and “out”, “us” and “not-us” which are set into the bedrock of distinctively human culture.

Girard postulates that human culture emerges from an (often repeated) act of lynching amongst groups of proto-humans that came as we constructed goodness and badness. “Good” and “bad”, “in” and “out”, “us” and “not-us”, and all their related culture-sustaining binaries would only have emerged fully within our race as a result of the frenzy of a group’s all-against-all yielding to the all-against-one in which anthropoids discovered ourselves as humans. The lack of differentiation in the horde starts to yield to the beginning of regular culture as a source of meaning and structure emerges: the one who is “not us”. The one who, being “out”, enables us to be “in”. The one who thus enables us to sense

the “goodness” of what we have done, and detect them as “bad”. This does indeed illustrate how the emergent difference that it later became possible to call a “victim” is at the root of our hominization, and how victimhood is an ineluctable reality in our species.

Goodness or badness according to “sacrifice”, then, is what enables us to be good by contrast with some defiling other. And goodness or badness, according to mercy, is discovered in our being moved (or not) to show neighbourliness to one considered defiling. Thus, we may find ourselves relating to victimhood in a way that dances around it, as it were, being given an apparently strong identity in our going along with the various forms of fascination with, and repulsion from, victimhood. In this way, we will merely be continuing the founding gestures of human culture, seduced by our own lie about the one who “is not us”. Or, with much greater difficulty (at least in my case), we can allow ourselves to face the centrality of the victim in a way that is not run by a mixture of fascination and fear: be given to be who we are to be, starting from our recognition of ourselves in the one who is just there. The attitude to victims is the criterion for neighbourliness.

Let’s watch the Samaritan a little. As he comes along the road, he undergoes a certain draw. The verb is passive. His entrails did something to him; they moved him. In fact, he saw the wounded one entrail to entrail, saw the altogether too-visible entrails of the other as his own—which is, as we have seen, what God does in the Temple sacrifice with the Lord’s portion, the entrails, of the victim. So this is what it is like to find yourself on the inside of the life of God! It means being gut-wrenched by your likeness with vulnerable flesh.

Finding himself on the inside of the life of God means that the Samaritan is able to draw near to the place of death, actual or potential, with no fear. He is not moved by death. It doesn’t exercise any draw or fascination for him. The possibility that the person to whom he is drawing close might actually be, or shortly become, a corpse—an instrument of defilement—doesn’t concern him. Just as it doesn’t concern him that his beast of burden would have been rendered unclean by carrying a bloodied person or a cadaver. Being unmoved by death, he is fully able to draw close to a fellow human being without fear.

Let us think through this attitude towards death a little more. It does seem to be completely central to how we understand being on the inside of the life of God, for in the parable we are dealing with two approaches to the same reality: the deathlessness of God. In the one approach, God's deathlessness is somehow thought to need protecting, and protecting in two senses: protecting *against*, because it is thought to be a hugely violent and unstable reality that might swamp mere humans with wrath; and protecting *from* contamination, as though God's deathlessness would somehow be diminished if allowed to be brought close to corruption and mortality.

In the other approach, the deathlessness of God is such that it is not in rivalry in any way at all with the reality of death. It is able to move towards, and around, and with, mortal beings and mortal remains without in any sense being weakened by them. On the contrary, it is the deathlessness of God which gives life to mortal things. So, faced with a half-dead stranger on a road, one understanding of deathlessness interprets the half-dead one as on the way to death, and thus to be shunned. The other interprets the half-dead one as able to be brought to life, and thus to be nurtured.

In Jesus' Resurrection, God demonstrated to us—fully, firmly, three-dimensionally—that God's deathlessness is of this latter sort: a life so completely deathless as to be able to assume being a shameful victimary corpse, and become as such the source of life for others. So what is meant by the Resurrection as an impetus for moral life is that we are inducted into beginning to live as if death were not, being able to befriend our mortality in all its extremities—extremities which include human victimhood in all its moral and physical dimensions. The outward and visible sign, if you like, of the Resurrection in our lives is the fear and stigma of death having become moot for us, and thereafter for our creativity, our longing for justice and flourishing, to have been unleashed into the beginnings of practical responses, with death no longer their circumscription.

Here again, I think Girard's mimetic understanding of desire is very helpful in exploring how this works in our lives. As you may remember, what is central to that account is that *we desire according to the desire of another*. So, it is through the eyes of a model that an object

acquires desirability. For instance, I, who know nothing about art, find myself becoming friends with someone who is a connoisseur of fine art. As I spend time with her, her knowledge about, sensitivity towards, and enthusiasm for fine art “rubs off on me” (as we would say without thinking about it too exactly). I find myself on visits to museums and galleries, even when she is not present, appreciating and enjoying the works of art vastly more than I did before I knew her. In fact, what has happened is that I have started to see art through her eyes. It is not, of course, that I have put her on, like a mask or a space suit, so that her eyes are on loan to me. It is the pattern of her desire which has reproduced itself in me, by my being drawn to imitate her, such that it feels at first as if someone else were looking through my eyes, and I am gradually coming to see what they see. Then, little by little, this becomes connatural to me, with my being scarcely aware of all the other pairs of eyes that have drawn me into my ever-richer appreciation of the objects in question.

It seems to me that this is the human and anthropological pattern that the Resurrection has in our lives. If the model is God, and the object “Creation”—or everything that is—then the question becomes “How do we learn to love, to desire, everything that is, in the same way God does?” The difficulty is that God is not a model in any obvious sense. If we do not have a human model to imitate, one at our level, then we have no ability to desire according to God, and we will be left at the mercy of modelling each other’s desires while claiming that we desire according to a frightening sacred object who is in fact a projection of ourselves and of our fears and of our violence—what is traditionally called an “idol”. We will be stuck, in fact, with that draw towards and repulsion from victims, a kind of unstable and two-faced fascination which characterises the archaic sacred.

However, what we have in Jesus’ Resurrection is a fully human set of eyes for whom death is not; a real human life story that is a living-out at the anthropological level of the deathlessness of God. Because of this, that life is able to get alongside us and into us in the same way as the fine art connoisseur’s pattern of desire; we start to be able to look at creation, at everything that is, through those same deathless eyes. The pattern of desire of the deathless one opens our eyes to what

really is in the world, without us having to run away from, or be run by, death. It becomes possible for us to be towards everything that is in the same way as the deathless one, and so to be creative and daring and imaginative without fear or hurry. The deathless one has opened up the possibility of our pattern of desire being towards everything that is in this quite specifically deathless way. And of course, everything that is actually looks quite different if looked at with humanly deathless eyes. Observation affects reality, as quantum physicists tell us. Just as the reality of creation underwent a real change when human consciousness was born, and anthropoids started looking at everything around about them through those hugely more powerful and dangerous things—human eyes—so that same reality has been undergoing a further change as, ever since Jesus' Resurrection, reality has been able to be observed from within itself by the deathless One looking through fully human eyes, into whose gaze we find ourselves drawn.

Let's get back to the Samaritan. So far, we've noticed that he has been drawn towards the victim in a completely non-repulsed way and that he is simply unmoved by issues of death. So proximity is not a problem. But what is just as interesting is that absence is not a problem either. As we carry on watching him, we can see that part of the gut-wrenching he is undergoing is sensed as a tremendous privilege. He is finding himself on the inside of the life of God! So he is quite unconcerned about sensible limits to goodness; he is just delighted to find himself on the inside of this adventure. He doesn't try to palm off the wounded one on the innkeeper. He seems to realise that he's found a centre to his life and activity that is worth sticking to. Rather than saying to himself "How little can I get away with and still be a decent person?"—which is what I find myself thinking whenever I'm in an analogous situation—he seems to realise he is being given something good by sharing the life of this victim. And this means he owns the situation—makes it his own. Which, of course, means: he allows the victim to be the one who owns him.

However, this doesn't mean he is now condemned, in some thoroughly unhealthy way, to fixate morbidly on hanging in there with the victim, as though the victim needed to see him the whole time, or as though the only real forms of love or compassion were some perpetual

and intense face-to-face with the vulnerable other. Nor does the Samaritan have any need to be seen to be doing good. Part of the privilege, on the inside of which he has discovered himself, is that he is able to take responsibility for the victim as a project over time. This means not being obsessively present or obsessively absent. It means being able to be quite invisible while still caring for and looking after the victim, setting up intermediary agents and instruments who will be rewarded—and know they will be rewarded—for playing their part in his generosity. The Samaritan makes an open-ended commitment to the well-being of the victim without any fear of limiting himself, of getting tied down, trapped in a responsibility that would in some way diminish him. On the contrary, it is as though he has discovered with joy that he is going to be brought into being himself—going to become something much more, be added to enormously—precisely in his commitment to this precarious and unpredictable healing process. Being owned by the victim has turned out to be something much less panic-inducing and much more creative of spaciousness than he would have thought possible.

This, I think, is a second dimension to the process of beginning to live the life of the deathless one in the circumstances of contingent humanity. As death loses its power, so commitment to the flourishing of what is fragile and precarious becomes possible, and our relationship with time changes. Pledging yourself in an open-ended manner to make good on the hospital expenses of a severely injured person without any guarantee of payback is mostly a terrifying possibility. What is to stop you from being “taken to the cleaners” for everything you’ve got?

But what if time is not your enemy? If time is not your enemy, then what you achieve or don’t achieve—whether you are “taken to the cleaners” or not—is secondary. Whatever you have will be for the flourishing of the weak one, for as long as it takes, since you know that you will be *found there*. Being on the inside of the life of God looks like being decanted by a generosity you didn’t know you had in you, making a rash commitment which makes a nonsense of death, of worry, and of the panic of time, because you know you want to be found in loving proximity to what is weak and is being brought into being. Wanting to be *found there* is a huge statement of joy at the power and gentleness of One for whom it is the apparently weak and futile things that are going

to be enabled to be brought into being. Being given the daring to lose yourself in being *found there* is recognised as a privilege, to be greeted with praise.

This, I think, is what the Samaritan was discovering in his slow-burning, gentle and intelligent excitement—what St Paul would describe as “rightly reasoning worship” (Romans 12:1-2). That God is the One who brings into being *what is not*, and dwelling on the inside of the life of God means being prepared to lose sight of all the apparently important things, to give yourself away in extreme gentleness and tenderness towards that which is apparently not, yet which is being brought into being out of the brink of nothingness by one not ashamed of mingling with the least important of all, who has nowhere more important to be (1 Corinthians 1:22-29).

So, what *is* Jesus doing now? What is it like to share his life? My own answer includes a tinge of jealousy: the Samaritan had it lucky, having God rush through his entrails like an express train. For most of us, the process of having our hearts turned from Sacrifice to Mercy is incredibly, incredibly painful: the more any of us loves and is given a heart of flesh, the more alive that heart becomes. And the more alive it becomes, the more raw and painful the world comes to seem, even if it is also much, much richer and more interesting.

John's Testimony

Let us turn now to how St John deals with these matters. I'm going to put before you two different moments from the same discourse in St John's Gospel. Here's the first:

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. (John 13:34)

Now, at first blush, it appears an instruction is given, and then its sense is unfolded by an example. We start with an instruction: that you love one another. However, just telling someone to love someone is not

very useful. Left at that, it might simply be an injunction to strain your heart or your will towards someone, which you may or may not be able to do. So the example—“as I have loved you”—is supposed to add a little content to the demand that has been made. But we’re still in the universe of moralistic instructions.

I want to suggest a slightly different approach. As I read it, the second half of the verse is an exact paraphrase of the first part, a repetition with the deepest meaning brought out: Jesus’ *giving* a new commandment *consists in his doing* something for his disciples. It is his doing something for them—loving them, in a quite concrete way—which sets something in motion such that they find themselves impelled and enabled to reproduce it for each other. What He is doing—giving Himself up in love for them—can equally be described as the giving of a new commandment.

Can you see how this is the reverse of a moralistic instruction? This gift of something done becomes a unique kind of commandment because it sets something in motion which then itself stands as a summons, inviting you in to reproduce it. It is as if Jesus were saying: “For you to be able to love each other, you first need to know what it is like to be loved, and as you sink into knowing the shape of my love for you so you will be able to love each other”.

I hope you can see the difference: in one vision, something done for us becomes a defining source of our acting for others; in the other, we receive a moral injunction to do something huge but unclear. This difference fits straight in with the picture of being human that we’ve been looking at throughout this course: we are not individuals, locked in on ourselves, who must be told to do things; rather, we are all little, imitative, mimetic interactors who do what we see done. In other words, we desire according to the desire of the other, as we’ve been learning since our first chapter. The question is always: which other? When the other is Jesus, then, as we see Jesus doing for us, so we do. Love has a content from somewhere else, and the commandment is a commandment to imitate: “Even as I have loved you, so love one another.”

This picture is filled out even more in our second chunk from St John:

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. (John 15:12-14)

I hope you can see that there would be a glitch in this passage if we were to assume the moralistic “authority gives instruction” mode of teaching. In that mode, Jesus has friends, lays down his life for them, and then commands them—who are already his friends—to do the same to others. However, that’s not what the passage says! The passage presupposes that those for whom he gives his life *are not yet his friends*. On the contrary, he is opening up the possibility for them to become his friends by his doing something for them, on the inside of which they will then find themselves as multipliers of exactly what he has done, which is how they will become his equals, his friends. They will become people who are empowered to give themselves away, freely acting out of being insiders in something that has been opened up for them by someone who loved them.

In other words, the gift of creating this possibility for his friends and the commandment to create it... *are the same thing*. There is no moralism here! There would be moralism if something were done, and as a result, something was then commanded. That could indeed be a sort of emotional blackmail: “Look at me, I’ve done something for you, gone to so much trouble and suffering for you, now at least show I have purchase on your heartstrings: do what I say”. Instead of that, what we have is a personal invitation, such that each of the disciples—which is each one of us—finds him or herself being taken out of the realm of blind commandments into that sharing in equality of spirit which is friendship:

No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide; so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. This I command you, to love one another. (John 15:15-17)

Servants are told to do something, and if they don't understand why they should do it, they're told: "You don't need to understand why, just do it, you're a servant. I, the Master, know why I want it done, and your ways are not my ways". Morals are often taught in this way! Friends, however, are chosen freely and become trusted insiders on a level of equality with each other. They are not given compartmentalised tasks, but are entrusted with being imaginative, creative sharers in the whole project. As they share in a project, discovering for themselves the open-ended parameters made available by the One Who Gave Himself, so they will find they are not only friends of the One who inaugurated the project, but brothers, heirs, the ultimate insiders, fully adopted into the life of the Son. Jesus makes it possible for us to share his desire at the level of equality, which is friendship. We are enabled to desire as Jesus desires, according to the Father. Given that, it makes perfect sense to ask the Father for whatever we want, *as if* we were the Son, because we will, in fact, be becoming the Son, the ultimate insider in the life of God.

Paul, and Receiving Ourselves Through the Eyes of One Who Loves Us

I hope you can see what is central here, and this is essential to being inducted into the Christian faith: it presupposes that, before we do anything, we are drawn in—by an initiative not our own—into becoming aware of what has been done for us. Do you see how quickly and easily we can jump over and forget phrases like "Even as I have loved you" and remember only the "Love one another" part? Yet it is our being-loved *before we knew it* that has opened all this up. And that doesn't only mean we are asked to remember *how much* we have been loved, as though it were in the first place a matter of emotional degree. It is more properly *the shape* of our being loved: that someone was prepared to occupy the place of victimage and shame and non-being, patiently and gently, out of love for us, long before we sensed how much we depended on such a thing. Or, as we read once again in John:

For it was in *this* way that God loved the world: that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16).

The majority of translations read “For God so loved the world”, suggesting that the word “so” is a matter of emphasis or psychological force, short for “so much.” However, exactly the same words in Greek can be read to bring out a demonstrative sense: “God loved the world *in just this way*: namely, that he gave his only Son”. I find this demonstrative sense more congruent with John’s overall approach to Revelation. As we get a sense of what it is like to be loved from that space of God’s giving, we begin to be empowered and impelled to open it up for others.

That, I think, is the challenging part of Christian morality: not what we do, but perceiving what has been done for us, becoming attentive to the one who is speaking us into being. It is so much more difficult to allow ourselves to undergo something, to appreciate what we are finding ourselves on the inside of, and to allow ourselves to be stretched by it towards others, than it is to say: “I haven’t got the time for all that ‘being loved’ stuff, just tell me what to do”.

Yet this sinking into appreciation of being loved is no mere passive exercise. In fact, it is usually through little acts of being stretched out towards others that we find ourselves becoming more aware of being loved. The two moments, activity and undergoing, then enrich and inform each other.

In any case, I would like to offer you an exercise: one to enable you to sit, over time, in a sense of being on the receiving end of being-loved. We’re going to look at the famous passage from 1 Corinthians about love. Owing to its use in weddings; it tends to have associations with a particular account of love, and a specific moment of love, neither of which are bad things. But the passage is much richer than that. I’m going to read this passage—not, if you like, as a piece of abstract moralism defining what love is, but as an invitation to dwell in what it looks like to undergo the presence of One who loves you. In other words: to dwell in everything we’ve seen about Jesus, the forgiving victim coming towards us, and our sitting in his regard:

Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. (1 Corinthians 13:4-7)

You may remember from our ninth chapter that we looked at prayer as “sitting in the regard of the Other other”. Here I’m asking you to allow *yourselves* to be looked at from the regard which Paul sets out.

What does it mean to realise that the One looking at me is doing so in a way that is *patient*? Not in a hurry, not impatient with my slowness and waywardness, needing me to get things right already. Able to take time, not needing to correct me yet; approaching me without edge, gently, in a way that is not out to get me, that doesn’t need to put me down—that is a kind regard. Those eyes are looking at me in a way that is not jealous, not in rivalry with me in any way, not disturbed if I’m having a good day, nor trying to manipulate me for Brownie points. They aren’t determined that I shouldn’t have too good a time, since that will make me big-headed, nor are they only wanting me to be successful so they can feel successful through me, as though I were a means to their end.

They are genuinely hugely glad if I get something right, since they genuinely want my good—for no other purpose than that they like me. They are not arrogant, grasping things for themselves, marking off their turf and making me feel small by contrast, diminishing me with funny little names or labels that put me into a box and make me less. They have no need to put me down by damning me with faint praise. Their praise is that of genuine delight in something equal to themselves.

What is it like to pick up that I am loved in this way? “*Love does not insist on its own way*”. What a very extraordinary thing to say! We are talking about the regard of God, the eyes of the Creator of the Universe—the one to whom we pray “Thy will be done”—looking at us. Yet the presence and regard of love is not in rivalry with our will. It is not someone trying to steamroll us, getting us to do something we find awful, trying to use us for a nefarious end. This presence of love has been prepared to put itself under us, and from that vulnerable place

actually wants to join us in discovering our way, rejoicing and saying, “Oh, that’ll be fun! I wonder where she’ll take it? Why would that be interesting? You really want to do that? OK, I’m with you!”

This regard is not irritable, or resentful—and don’t we know what it is like to be held in an irritable or resentful regard! We’re always too much, or too little; we don’t measure up. Someone who is not irritable is saying: “You know, you’re just right! What fun it is to be with you! Are you having a wonderful time? That makes me *soooo* pleased!” Love doesn’t rejoice at wrong—no *schadenfreude* here, no sense of “I’m just waiting for you to trip up on some banana skin and then you’ll get your comeuppance, your contentment now is just pride before a fall”. This regard doesn’t take any pleasure in my discomfiture, is not at all keen to see me getting things wrong, “so that you’ll learn”. It shows no smug satisfaction in my mistakes and my follies; instead, it is just beaming when I get it right.

This regard, this presence of love *bears all things*. What on earth is it like to bear all things? We can bear a certain amount of other people’s sickness, other people’s betrayals, their infidelities. All these things we can bear to a certain extent, though it’s a great strain. So what is it like to discover that all my sickness, all my slowness, all my laziness, all my infidelities are being borne by someone for whom I am still, just as I am, an exciting project?

This same love *believes all things*. It believes in me as an investment that, despite all the evidence, is going to give fruit. When I occasionally say something aspirational, that I would really like to be true—what I would really like to become and to achieve, but which is pretty unlikely given who I usually am—this regard doesn’t say: “Oh yeah, that’s the kind of thing he says when he’s in a good mood, but it’s just a flash in the pan, we know what he’s really like”. No, the regard of love takes me at my best, most aspirational word, and believes in me over time so that the rest of me can catch up with the wildcard dream I would have difficulty recognising as myself. The regard of love says: “It is going to be so much more fun to take you at your most daring, and make that true, rather than tease you and belittle you for having ideas above your station”.

“Believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” Love doesn’t take no for an answer, doesn’t recognise things being closed off, shut down. Instead, it is constantly re-imagining us as potential, as adventure. Love has already occupied the place of shame and rejection, of being a non-person in our midst, so it doesn’t allow itself to be deflected by my hostility. It looks past my anger, my resentment, my taking myself too seriously. Love is prepared to occupy the place of the loser, to endure loss, to be dead. Love not only puts up with all that but, while going through it all, never loses sight of a “me” I often give up on, a “me” by whom this lover wants to be enriched forever.

Paul’s language fills out dimensions of the Forgiving Victim’s regard in our midst. This is the space which Jesus has opened up for us, so as to show us how God looks at us. As we find ourselves being looked at in this way, as we sink into allowing this regard to tell us who we are, we find ourselves impelled from within, contagiously, to do the same for others.