

A GOD WHO CALLS BEYOND

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“The house of my soul is too narrow for you to come in; let it be enlarged by you. It is in ruins. Do you restore it”. (St. Augustine)

Yesterday we spoke about the call that is felt in the depths of one's being summoning one to grasp one's destiny as human. It is the realisation that life is changed forever, and the past is over.
Today we look at the changed face of the God who calls.

A Purification

*At the start of spring I open a trench^[SEP]
in the ground. I put into it^[SEP]
the winter's accumulation of paper^[SEP]
pages I do not want to read^[SEP]
again, useless words, fragments^[SEP]
errors. And I put into it^[SEP]
the contents of the outhouse^[SEP]
light of the sun, growth of the ground^[SEP]
finished with one of their journeys^[SEP]
To the sky, to the wind, then^[SEP]
and to the faithful trees, I confess^[SEP]
my sins: that I have not been happy^[SEP]
enough, considering my good luck^[SEP]
have listened to too much noise^[SEP]
have been inattentive to wonders^[SEP]
have lusted after praise^[SEP]
And then upon the gathered refuse^[SEP]
of mind and body, I close the trench^[SEP]
folding shut again the dark^[SEP]
the deathless earth. Beneath that seal^[SEP]
the old escapes into the new.¹*

This will centre hugely round Jesus: when the first disciples thought of Jesus, they remembered what a life full of God looked like.

What do you need to "bury in your trench," so that the old will escape into the new? I propose that the first thing we need to bury is the old images of God that no longer sustain. Did you ever wonder why it was that the first commandment calls us to abandon false gods and cleave to the God who reveals Godself to us now? Idolatry is the sin that humankind is most prone to commit. We are constantly forming smaller ideas of God, a God who allows us to stay within fixed bounds of belief. No wonder Hafiz can warn us against any adherence to small gods!

¹ Wendell Berry (From Collected Poems: 1957-1982)

Dear ones,
Beware of the tiny gods frightened men
Create
To bring an anaesthetic relief
To their sad
Days.

~ Hafiz ~

We would as soon you were stable and reliable,
We would as soon you were predictable
And always the same toward us.
We would like to take the hammer of doctrine
And take the nails of piety
And nail your feet to the floor
And have you stay in one place.
And then we find you moving,
Always surprising us,
Always coming at us from new directions.
Always planting us
And uprooting us
And tearing all things down
And making all things new.

You are not the God we would have chosen
Had we done the choosing,
But we are your people
And you have chosen us in freedom.
We pray for the great gift of freedom
That we may be free toward you
As you are in your world.
Give us that gift of freedom
That we may move in new places
In obedience and gratitude.
Thank you for Jesus
Who embodied your freedom for us all.
Amen.²

² Walter Brueggemann, *Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth*

Karen Armstrong and the Axial Age: a time of violence and the big questions being asked.

Today we are, it is said, at another axial age, when we are once more looking at religious beliefs that have been handed down to us. We appear to be undergoing a religious and spiritual transitional period today, that is comparable to that experienced during the Axial Age. Once again, a radical change of the old forms of religious thinking seems to be happening. As Neale Donald Walsch wrote: yesterday's God cannot serve tomorrow's world. Any influence the established religions have is rapidly diminishing in much of the west. We appear to lie again on the cusp of an important religious experiment.

During the past ten thousand years, religions have maintained themselves as a type that is agrarian by nature. In the present social-cultural context, society is becoming less and less agrarian and must inevitably shed its agrarian form of religion which makes it most inaccessible. It must be understood that religion (in its anthropological-social-cultural form, a form assumed by human spirituality during the past ten thousand years) is going to disappear. Religiosity and human spirituality will continue and endure, but they will be transformed as they pass through a type of mutation or metamorphosis from which something perhaps unrecognizable will emerge.”³

Many of us, good men and women, live on the 'epidermis of faith', nourished by a conventional Christianity. We find religious security in the beliefs and practices that are within our reach, but we do not live in joyful relationship with Jesus Christ.⁴

Jesus is slowly being extinguished in our hearts, while we listen to 'clichés' that impoverish and distort his person: such a Jesus cannot attract, seduce, or enamour us. It also hurts to hear him described in routine, worn-out language. It does not ignite our hearts or set fire to the world; it does not start a conversation.

The last thing anyone thinks about the church is that it might be dangerous.

Going to church is safe, not subversive. It builds character perhaps, but it does not threaten the status quo. Of all the reasons given for the decline of the church in our time, the number one reason is often left unsaid: no one really expects anything important to happen.

Now for the good news: the Church of Jesus Christ in the western world is in terrible shape! That's right – the good news is the bad news – and that's good news. Why? Because, according to a distinguished scholar of religion, Phyllis Tickle, apparently about every five hundred years the church holds a sort of giant rummage sale. It must decide what goes and what stays, what is indispensable and what is irreplaceable. Five

³ Jose Maria Vigil, *A Call to Religious Life Worldwide*

⁴ Jose Pagola, *Jesus An historical approximation*

centuries after the Protestant Reformation, we find ourselves passing through precisely such a time. Think of it as a kind of spring cleaning. We are sorting through our theological stuff and asking painful and disorienting questions about where it came from, what it's worth, and why the once lucrative market for creeds and doctrines seems both depressed and depressing.

People have moved on. They want deeds not creeds. They want mission, not musings.

The problem is that most of what people argue about in church doesn't matter. That might be just sad except that we live in a perishing world.⁵

Strangely, we have come to a moment in human history when the message of the Sermon on the Mount could indeed save us, but it can no longer be heard above the din of dueling doctrines. Consider this: there is not a single word in that sermon about what to *believe*, only words about what to *do*. It is a behavioral manifesto, not a propositional one. Yet three centuries later, when the Nicene Creed became the official oath of Christendom, there was not a single word in it about what to do, only words about what to believe!

What, says Robin Meyers, must we do today so that once more we can take seriously what Jesus demanded of the first disciples? 'Follow me' he said, not 'worship me'.⁶

Since it was once dangerous to be a follower of The Way, the church can rightly assume that it will never be on the right track again until the risks associated with being a follower of Jesus outnumber the comforts of being a fan of Christ. Until we experience Jesus as a "radically disturbing presence," instead of a cosmic comforter, we will not experience him as true disciples. The first question any churchgoer should be asked and expected to answer is: *What are you willing to give up to follow Jesus?*

"We begin to encounter Jesus when we begin to trust God as he did, when we believe in love as he did, when we come to suffering people as he did, when we defend life as he did, when we look at people as he did, when we confront life and death with hope as he did, when we pass on the contagion of the Good News as he did."⁷

Jesus cannot think about God without thinking about his plan to transform the world. Thus for Jesus the best place to understand God is not at worship, but wherever God is making the reign of justice a reality among human beings. Jesus understands God in the midst of life, as an accepting presence for the excluded ones, as a healing power for the sick, as gratuitous forgiveness for the guilty, as hope for those who have been defeated by life.

⁵ Robin Meyers, *The Underground Church*

⁶ Robin Meyers, *Saving Jesus from the Church*

⁷ Pagalo

“The great challenge today is to convert the sacred bread into real bread, the liturgical peace into political peace, the worship of the Creator into reverence for the Creation, the Christian praying community into an authentic human fellowship. It is risky to celebrate the Eucharist. We may have to leave it unfinished, having gone first to give back to the poor what belongs to them.” [Raimundo Panniker]

“Redemption means overcoming all forms of patriarchy.... Suffering is a factor in the liberation process, not as a means of redemption, but as the risk that one takes when one struggles to overcome unjust systems whose beneficiaries resist change. The means of redemption is conversion, opening up to one another, changing systems of distorted relations, creating loving and life-giving communities of people here and now, not getting oneself tortured to death.” [Rosemary Radford Ruether]

For decades the concern of European church leaders and theologians has focussed on persons whose faith is threatened by the acid of secular, atheistic culture. Among the poor, by contrast, the focus is not on the non-believer struggling for faith but on the non-person struggling for life. Here the question is not whether God exists, but how to believe in God amid such inhumane suffering. The quest for an answer moves theology to proclaim the true God of life against false idols.

Idolatry entails putting alien gods before the true God of the Bible. In the Church of the Poor these gods are money, the comforts it brings, and the power necessary to make and keep it. And like all false gods, money and its trappings require the sacrifice of victims. The truth of God is twisted to justify human oppression, and companion creatures are demeaned in the name of a distorted view of divine will. On this frontier a profound challenge goes forth to the whole church: stop trivialising the scandalous statements that scripture makes about God.

Kofi Annan: Naming Evil: intolerance, exclusion and the false belief I have nothing to learn from people and cultures other than my own.

I would like to finish with a reading of the Scriptures that allows us to see how central Jesus’ cry for justice is to the whole scene. It is not about another world that he alludes, not about ‘salvation’ for the sake of heaven or the soul. It is about this world and the right relationships that are central to being human, and thus finding our soul.

In the parable that we have called the unjust judge, or the importunate widow, we come across the story of the widow crying for justice and the judge procrastinating. The parable with the image of God as the widow and we are the unjust judge – not paying attention to the injustice in our world and the cries of the poor.

Getting out of an image of a male God. But it is not enough to omit the male pronoun or to include the female pronoun, when our invocation still includes all the male attributes: all-powerful, all-knowing, invincible, and so on. Look at the feminine images in the Bible and see how they change how we view God.